SOAMES GREEN

BY

MARGARET RIVERS LARMINIE

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MARGARET RIVERS LARMINIE

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TO MY SISTER

VERA LARMINIE

SOAMES GREEN

CHAPTER ONE

I

THE September mists were rising in the water-meadows below Soames Green. Swathing the dwarf trunks of the alders by the river, they reached out in thin spears and shafts and delicately suspended wreaths and scarves towards the little town across the fields. But the sun was still well above the lifting edge of mist and cloud near the horizon, and its tempered brightness lay like a bloom upon the red roofs of Soames Green, upon its old walls and the placid surface of its canal. There was no wind, and no suggestion yet of anything but autumn's most gracious aspect in that mild and beneficent air. The leaves still hung like ripe fruit on the trees, and the sunshine had its special September quality — divided between haziness and clarity — in which the houses appeared to possess breadth without depth, and all the excrescences of porch or lattice or projecting roof to be merely painted on a flat and fragile surface with an edging of painted shadow.

The town ran east and west, cut in two by the canal and rising a little on the eastern bank, so that on this side such windows as faced the dropping sun were now flaming in its rays, while below the bridge the streets were mostly in shadow, pierced here and there by long

shafts of light like fallen pillars of gold. The High Street, sloping gently upward and eastward from the canal, was irregular in design, with trees growing unexpectedly out of a broad sidewalk that lifted or dropped here and there in shallow steps towards the old shop-fronts standing far back from the street. Where this street — dignified, beautiful, leisurely — was intersected by the more modern and bustling Station Road, the corner was emphasised by the sudden jutting out of a small Queen Anne house whose west wall formed a buttress to the retiring sidewalk. The main entrance, its brass plate inscribed with the words 'Messrs. Celian and Somerdew,' gave directly upon the High Street, but another door and several wired windows faced the Station Road, and a private entrance and one square ground-floor window opened onto the High Street sidewalk.

Upon this entrance and this window the level sun now laid a reddening beam; and finding the window open it penetrated into the room beyond and settled on the bent grey head of Mr. Peter Celian at his office table.

With his back to the door, his left cheek receiving the sun's mild ray, he sat facing a second window that opened into the garden, a small, turfed square tightly wedged into the congested angle between the yard of a Station Road shop and the neat patch of flower-bedded grass belonging to the High Street chemist. But on all three sides the Celian and Somerdew garden was enclosed by a high brick wall, so that from the northern window of Mr. Celian's office little could be seen but grass and leafage and the fine tracery of apricot and plum tree climbing the old red brick.

Sitting in that office, at its scrupulously tidy table, Mr. Celian had only to lift his eyes for them to rest immediately on a pleasant tangle of yellowing leaves; and only to turn his head to command a prospect of the High Street, with its haphazard trees, sloping down to the bridge. Below that bridge, to the north, invisible from the office but visible in every detail to his mental vision, stood Mulberry Lodge, Mr. Celian's private house. These twin centres of his universe — his home, and the building in which he laboured to support it — lay not more than three hundred yards apart; a circumstance which impressed him as an asset or a disadvantage according to his mood. For within the walls of this Queen Anne house, which witnessed daily the routine of his material career, Mr. Celian permitted himself some elasticity of mood, a thing he was more careful to standardise in the confines of his home. It appeared to him that if any human beings were obliged to run the risk of discomfort from exposure to his moods they should more fittingly be such as were adequately paid for their peril; the unpaid — his wife, his son and daughter and niece, severally persuaded into proximity by his own acts — could more justly, he felt, claim exemption from any penalty the proximity might impose. What penalties were to be apprehended he hardly knew, but suspected that without due precaution they would take shape. Most people had failings of one kind or another, some of which were distressing to those in intimate contact with them; and being in general a modest-minded person he assumed that his own failings would be as distressing as his neighbours' unless a very careful guard were kept upon their activities. That guard,

therefore, was least relaxed in the circle in which the majority of men feel entitled to relax themselves most.

Upon this middle-aged and middle-class solicitor of Soames Green Nature had bestowed a face that was oddly out of keeping with his temperament. For an alien and deceptive cynicism curved his wide and clear-edged lips, and in the long furrow drawn from nostril to chin lay a suggestion of self-indulgence and nervous irritability that were equally strangers to his disciplined and equable temper. Under a high and wide brow, the candour of which was the truest index to his character, two rather small and cold blue eyes looked out with a dispassionately critical and ironical gaze that bore no real relation to the sensitive and charitable soul hiding behind it; while a slow, precise, and sometimes pedantic form of speech, in an ungentle voice with no warmth of tone, was the medium of Mr. Celian's unfailing sympathy with human joys and griefs.

In the rather rare moments when he took an interest in his own personality — for he was unegotistical and more concerned with the interests of others than with himself — he sometimes paused during the process of shaving to stare with amused surprise at the reflection of his soap-smeared face. Its incongruity was palpable even to him, though he was far less aware of his own claims to virtue than his intimates had cause to be. And standing with razor poised, gazing at the cold blue eyes in his ironical red face, he would murmur —' Good God — is that really the impression I convey? — that most ungullible and disillusioned rake?'

Concluding that Nature had considerately provided him with protective colouring to save him from the

follies he and she knew well, he would then — twisting his mouth askew — draw the razor gingerly about its corners and dismiss himself from his mind.

II

UNPERTURBED and placid though he contrived to appear in the immediate circle of his office and home — a circle in which the cynic theory had long been exploded — Mr. Celian had just now several burdens on his mind. And on that more than ordinarily lovely September day, observing the sun's finger light up the brass face of his clock, he was relieved to find that its hands pointed to six, an hour when his conscience allowed him to put aside work that was not pressing in favour of any private concerns that were. That afternoon, though the private concerns involved — to his regret — no definite action at present, they demanded thought; and making a neat pile of the letters he had been signing, making little tidying movements with his square brown hands on the already super-tidy table, he left his chair, shut and bolted the two windows in case any one else neglected to do so, took his Homburg hat off its peg, and went out of the room.

A narrow hall crossed the width of the house, with the stairs facing the main entrance; beyond them, a passage leading to the housekeeper's quarters held also the door of Mr. Somerdew's room, and a second door, standing usually wide open, was that of the clerk's office with the wired windows looking onto the Station Road.

Mr. Celian paused near the staircase, glancing first out into the street and then, more reluctantly, towards his partner's room. Then, conscience having long held

dominion over mere desire, he went down the short passage and opened Mr. Somerdew's door.

'I'm just off, Frank,' he said from the threshold. 'Nothing you want me for?'

His junior partner, whom he had caught with a tilted chair and hands locked behind his head, brought the castors down with a thud on the carpet and hastily transferred his idle hands to a letter lying on the desk. 'Only this Maitland-Challerton affair, Mr. Celian. I hardly know what to say to the fellow.... I was just thinking it over ...'

The furrows in Mr. Celian's leathery cheek deepened, augmenting the cynicism of his lips, which in reality concealed a quite gently understanding smile. He knew Frank Somerdew's characteristic postures well enough to be certain that neither Mr. Maitland nor Lord Challerton nor any other client had been filling his thoughts or staying his pen just then. But without comment he advanced and picked up the letter. Seeing at once that it had no connection with the hurriedly improvised topic, and much disliking to make people uncomfortable by catching them out in harmless evasions, he said mildly, 'This appears to be the wrong letter. ... But you needn't bother about it to-day, need you? Speak to me in the morning.'

As he turned discreetly away from the immediately embarrassed colour in his partner's face, he added over his shoulder —'Look in to-night if you've nothing better to do'— and shut the door quickly on the other's slightly stammering 'Thanks very much — I'd like to ...'

With that invitation obscurely soothing his conscience — for actions that went against his own inclination seemed usually to benefit someone else — Mr.

Celian passed through the open hall door into the street. This action also went slightly against the grain; for, being by no means free from foibles, he derived always a very secret and childish pleasure from using his own private door in the High Street sidewalk. No one else had the privilege of doing so; and for years the insertion of its key on entering, the sharp snap of its closing when he went out, had fed his private satisfaction in being Mr. Celian of Soames Green — a circumstance which no other act so emphasised to his consciousness. Frank Somerdew went in and out of the main entrance, as junior partners had always done; Frank Somerdew, moreover, on leaving for the day, took train to Wintlebourne, two stations up the line. He was not with any completeness Mr. Somerdew of Soames Green. It was reserved, and had been for three generations, for the reigning Mr. Celian to shut his private office door and walk leisurely home — responding affably to the greetings of neighbours — to his private house by the bridge. And for Mr. Peter Celian, most unpretentious and socially unaspiring of men, this small tradition had a quite disproportionate value. He was aware of his own absurdity and faintly ashamed of it, yet it was one of the few failings he had never made any attempt to eradicate. Indeed he rather fostered it, hugging its cause to his heart. For in an existence which to himself seemed relatively insignificant and futile, he clung to the one small material evidence of justification for existing at all. He was Mr. Celian of Soames Green. The familiar phrase, with its hint of dignity and respect, held always a little balm for his inward conviction that he had missed his way in life. Fully conscious of the microscopic significance, to the large world, of his place

in it, it yet supported and consoled his diffidence that he should be definitely known — if only to a little country town just beyond the London suburbs — as Mr. Somebody of Anywhere.

The street received him, and he was enveloped soothingly in an air that seemed to be composed of the dust of gold coins. His back straightened, his worries slid away, and he turned into the Station Road with a little song bubbling up from the recesses of his chest and emerging — for he was not musical — only as a vague murmur on his lips. He was bound for the station, to enquire into the non-arrival of a brace of partridges despatched some days earlier from the North. The sender was old Mr. Somerdew, Frank's father and late partner to Mr. Celian and his father before him. Mr. Somerdew senior was no sportsman himself, but he was visiting a son-in-law who was; and Mr. Celian could not avoid a suspicion that the partridges were sent less for the sake of pleasing the Celian palate than of a small display of affluent connection. He had heard so often of 'my son-in-law's shoot' — 'my son-in-law's coverts' — and so little of the daughter who provided the agreeable link, that there was at least some justification for the ungrateful thought. And on finding that the missing birds were apparently still in passage, for the station-master knew nothing of them, Mr. Celian again departed from his habitual kindliness of mind so far as to wonder briefly whether the promised brace had ever materialised beyond the postcard on which the promise was inscribed.

Pulling himself up self-reproachfully, he realised that he was feeling a little out of joint with the world; and

in spite of the gentle exhilaration of the atmosphere he remembered the disturbing matters that had drawn him so punctually from his work.

Phœbe ... that dear daughter of his ... what was going to become of her? ... Frank Somerdew — the fellow had just bought a car, too, confound him — though, of course, very jolly for him and Mr. Celian didn't grudge it in the least.... Dr. Briton — what chance had he with Phœbe? ... and then poor Martin Holme with that ghastly wife.... Flora had always seemed a good sort of name till she spoilt it for him ... poor wretch, poor wretch — who might have been almost as charming a creature as his own girl if the fates had been kinder to her.... Unless one must blame only her parents before her and theirs before them — or blame nothing and no one at all.... But there was undoubtedly a taint somewhere — look at that poor sister of hers with her lovely little face ruined by its vacant stare, and her undersized, undeveloped body. Parental responsibility was the devil of a load, and it went so irretrievably far back.... That brought his thoughts to Lena Corry, his wife's niece. Her mother was a fool and her father a knave; but whose fault was that? Anyhow, Lena — though no fool — was undeniably something of a problem for her present guardian—difficult, perplexing, worrying.... Mr. Celian feared that his son Roger found her intriguing enough to be charming — he didn't grudge her her charm, but not for Roger, not for Roger.... Odd, he thought, that this pleasant corner of the world, this Soames Green that had held the larger part of his life, should propagate problems so out of harmony with its gracious peace. And he himself in the midst of them —

disturbed, anxious! — How came he among them or they pressing about him? ...

Being unaware of his own selflessness, Mr. Celian was also unaware that upon those who evade the tyranny of Self there falls at once the immense burden of other people's woes.

Soames Green Station — the termination of a short branch line which, with no through trains to London, secured the town from suburbanism — stood in comparative isolation on a high bank above the canal. Mr. Celian descended from it by a steep path leading to a plank bridge, painted black and white, that spanned the stretch of unnavigable water bordering his own grounds. From that elevation, as he went slowly downwards, he had a good view of his house immediately below the main bridge. A plain, early-Georgian structure, it yet had the dignity of right proportions and maturity, and the reflection in the canal of its creamy walls and yellowing slate roof gave it an added importance and charm. Its lawns, walled garden, and field narrowing to the plank bridge were bounded on the east only by the smooth water of the canal; a screen of high trees enclosed the small property on the west, shutting out the farther houses and fields. But from the gate near the plank bridge, by which Mr. Celian presently paused, there was an uninterrupted view of the water-meadows stretching away to the trout stream known as the River Jenny. Just now the mists obscured the distances, and only the tops of the little alders showed, like trees half-submerged by a flood.

Mr. Celian, leaning on the gate, ran his eye along the fence that dipped to the water's edge, and observed

with satisfaction that a length of clean white wood replaced the broken rail he had discovered the day before. Murmuring, 'Good man, Pinkett — wastes no time' — he remembered that the hinge of the little gate onto the plank bridge — his own property though established as a right of way — also needed repair; and returning to look at it found that Pinkett's haste had clouded his memory, for the hinge was still unmended. To a mind so precise as Mr. Celian's the omission was a source of irritation; but kindliness holding sway over less admirable emotions, he thought only, with mildness, 'Damn the fellow, he's got no head —' and stooped to examine a small flower, growing at the water's edge, to which he could put no name.

As he crouched there on his heels, the loud hoot of a car crossing the main bridge made him look up; and for some moments he continued in his cramped posture, in a suddenly uneasy meditation, staring at the bridge. For on the nearer side, with his back to the row of youngsters kicking their heels against the farther parapet, stood a man Mr. Celian recognised as the Martin Holme who had been lately in his thoughts. He was standing rather rigidly upright, with a hand on the stone parapet and his head turned a little to the left, towards Mr. Celian's garden. And in that garden, close to the water's edge, sat Mr. Celian's daughter Phœbe, with her face lifted towards the bridge.

The situation, in itself, had no special significance, for Martin Holme, returning from London, was obliged to cross either that bridge or the smaller one to reach his house in the lower village; but the circumstance that arrested Mr. Celian's attention, making his heart thump a little as if he had caught himself eavesdrop-

ping, was the lack of any greeting, any sort of normal exchange between the two. They remained, oddly immovable, looking fixedly at each other across the space of water that divided them. And something in this immobility — something tallying with Mr. Celian's earlier reflections — struck him as at once ominous and disturbing and sweet. His sensitive heart, almost guiltily throbbing, stirred afresh with a sensation as if a breath of high romance had blown upon it, blowing away the slumbering thoughts of law-suits and broken fences and the details of daily life. That daily life seemed suddenly very trivial and meaningless compared with the quiescent force and significance of this long, grave motionless gaze. Its length and gravity and stillness created for the soul of Mr. Celian — that secret Romantic — an atmosphere of far more vital life than could have been conveyed by any emotional movement or speech.

Martin Holme moved at last, lifted a hand in vague salute, and disappeared across the bridge. But, transferring his gaze immediately to his daughter, Mr. Celian saw no answering movement. With her face still gravely raised, her hands still clasping the book on her knees, she watched Holme pass out of sight.

With a little sigh, his stiffening knees cracking faintly as he rose from his unintentional covert, Mr. Celian recrossed the canal and entered his field.

III

THE dining-room at Mulberry Lodge, though fitted for convenience with electric light, dispensed at dinner-time with a modern device which seemed at variance with its atmosphere of earlier times; and the faces of

the Celian household, gathered round the table, were lighted only by six candles behind apricot-tinted shades. That delicate light — subdued and warm, with faintly fluttering shadows — shone now upon a company of five.

Phœbe Celian had one side of the table to herself, facing her brother and their cousin Lena Corry. The heads of these two, one fair and one very dark, had for background an uncurtained window giving upon the curved sweep of cobblestones leading to the unused stable-yard. Beyond that space the houses jutted out again, yet not so far but that from Phœbe's place she could command a limited prospect of the street. Dusk had descended there now, and the window-panes had turned such a deep blue that the reflection of candles and white cloth and the heads of Roger and Lena were painted upon them like a dark picture in a white frame. But here and there the yellow of a street lamp, the red glow through a closed shop-door, obtruded into the picture from outside; and Phœbe's eyes could pierce the familiar image of her surroundings to the familiar realities beyond. She loved her surroundings and her family and the comfortable candle-lit dinner-table; but in her mood of that evening it was a deeper pleasure to ignore them and to project herself, psychically, into the dusk-grey street that led between irregular lines of old houses to a cross-road branching northwards to the water-meadows. That road would be nearly dark now, with hardly a lamp to lighten its tree-bordered gloom and few houses to break the margin of trees. But at its farther end, where the trees stopped and the meadows began, the road to the river passed a small house — creamy-fronted and black-shuttered behind a high yew

hedge — where a yellow light would be shining benignly from a dark-walled room, shining upwards from the surface of a polished table set with old silver and glass. And at that table, in an atmosphere laceratingly different from the harmonious one at Mulberry Lodge, Martin Holme would be sitting now, with his wife and sister-in-law....

Mr. Celian, watching his daughter unobtrusively, observed how often her eyes went to the blue-paned window. The suspicion which for some weeks had been obscurely troubling him had hardened to certainty that afternoon while he watched her in the garden looking up at the bridge; and now his imagination followed with difficulty the journey of her thoughts to the white-walled house. And envisaging, as she had, the three who sat within it, his heart felt heavy and sore in his breast. It was true, then; but *how* true? — to what extent? ... Without malice, he tried a little experiment.

'The curtains aren't drawn, Amy. Do you like to be observed of all Soames Green in the gross act of dining?'

Phœbe said at once, 'Oh, Guv'nor, they're much jollier like that. Don't have them drawn.'

Her mother glanced at the window. 'There won't be many people about just now — and I always think the light looks so pretty from outside. But just as you like, darling.'

Mr. Celian stopped the advancing maidservant with 'Leave them alone, Ellen; Miss Phœbe likes them like that.'

Well, so he might have liked them himself once, and for a similar reason; and if he deplored the source of her preference, he had nothing but kindness for it. In

that far-off time, thirty years ago now, he had had his own wild and lovely adventure of the heart, and its frustration had left him very gently disposed towards all womenkind, but especially towards such as were led by their emotions into unorthodox paths. How seldom — he thought now with unaccustomed melancholy — how seldom those dark paths emerged again into the light.... This wife of his, with her plump, soft face and slightly bulging kind blue eyes, was not the goal his young feet had sought. The real goal was missed, remained obscured and dark — though its missing had been the outcome of a deliberate mutual act, a deliberate mutual abandoning, rather than the loss of mere mischance.... Yet Amy was there, in a light of a sort; not dazzling, never quite satisfying to his frustrated and still imperfectly disciplined soul, but at least a pleasant glow, a loyal and kindly effulgence that had burnt steadily through everything and never gone out. And the warmth of it had engendered, primarily, the quiet flame he could guess at now in the soul of his daughter as she looked through the blue window into the dusk.... A most strange world, he thought pensively, with its beckonings and bafflings, its will-o'-the-wisps and *culs-de-sac*.... For there was he himself, leading a straight-forward, practical, fairly useful if rather monotonous existence, with his kindly wife, his much-loved son and daughter and his niece—that perplexing, repelling yet attractive girl — and thirty years lay between this day and the day when he and a woman quite unlike his wife had put aside, in pain, the desire of their sad hearts....

Roger Celian announced suddenly, 'I saw Briton this morning. Cicely's coming home.'

Lena drawled, 'How charming for you; you'll be able to renew your vows.'

'*Vows*, dear?' echoed Mrs. Celian. 'What vows?'

'Didn't you know?' Lena turned her dark eyes gravely upon her aunt. 'Ten years ago Roger and Cicely Briton were irrevocably engaged.'

'You silly ass!' said Roger, without vehemence. But his father saw a small cloud of distaste and embarrassment pass into his face; and thinking —'Poor lad, he's remembering he's lost an arm since then' — he said at once, 'A lot can be forgotten in ten years, Lena. And Cicely'll find in these days a much pleasanter object than the grubby schoolboy Roger was then.'

Gratefully conscious of the soothing intent behind his father's speech Roger answered, with a brief upward smile, 'Less *of* him, though, Guv'nor!'

'What a donkey you are, Roger,' Phœbe placidly interposed. 'As if any decent girl — *now* — minds a missing arm. Its absence is a decoration.'

Roger laughed. 'One might have been hit in the elbow, though — a rearward projection! ... But this is quite beside the point. The point is that Christopher's tremendously pleased, and his mother's more incoherent than usual with joy.'

Mrs. Celian said in a tone of doubtful perplexity, 'I suppose people know their own business best, but I never could understand how Florence Briton — or any mother — could consent to part with her girl for so long.'

'My dear Mummie,' said Phœbe with affectionate scorn, 'I'm perfectly sure you'd do without me for twice as long if you thought it would be to my advantage.'

'But *could* it be to your advantage?' Mrs. Celian protested, and looked surprised at her family's laughter. 'I mean, you foolish people, isn't it best for a girl to be with her mother while she's growing up?'

'Depends on her mother,' Roger said. '*And* on her mother's circumstances. Anyhow, Cicely's had a rattling good time, I imagine, at someone else's expense, and now the someone has conveniently died, and Cicely's coming home with a nice little income of her own.'

'Oh, *is* she?' Lena glanced at him significantly. 'Then you'd better be the quicker with your vows.'

With an acerbity that rarely appeared in his own house, Mr. Celian said, 'Lena, you're rather a vulgar young woman at times. Roger's mind doesn't run solely on money and matrimony.' Turning to his son, he asked. 'Talking of money — how does the stern business of publishing progress?'

'All the better, sir, for my entry into it! No other business would have benefited so much.'

'*Any* business would have benefited, I'm sure,' said Mrs. Celian, who was very literal and very partial. 'Phœbe darling, would you pass me the salt, please.'

Pursuing, outwardly, the topic of his son's employment, Mr. Celian's mind dwelt subconsciously on his own disappointment with regard to it. As a consequence of Roger's aversion from the study of law, the firm of Celian and Somerdew would come to an end on the senior partner's retirement from it. Or, if the two names survived, it would be for the sake of mere expediency, the carrying on of a tradition in which the soul was dead. There would be no more Celians to keep that soul alive; no longer, after he himself had yielded up the precious key of his private entrance,

would Mr. Celian of Soames Green take a secret and absurd pride in that cherished alliterative phrase; and no more, when the grave hid his pride and his follies and chastened desires, would any Celian come after him to resuscitate the phrase. Roger might become a prominent and prosperous partner in his publishing firm of Sirkett and Cole, but the more intimately involved in it his life became, the farther he must drift, in essence, from being Celian of Soames Green. The name of Somerdew would gradually supervene in the neighbourhood — Frank Somerdew would probably marry and settle in the town, and the senior partner's share in that small and homely tradition would soon be obliterated and lost....

His own thought repeated itself with significance in his mind. 'Frank Somerdew would probably marry and settle in the town....'

Frank Somerdew's partner raised his eyes again to his daughter's face. Hadn't he, earlier in the day, deliberately associated that name with that face? Hadn't he, most distastefully and with grindings of conscience, tried to accept the desirability of a permanent association between the two? Thinking of new cars, old Somerdew's sudden promotion to affluence, his own comparatively humble fortune, he had persuaded himself — against all his instincts of simplicity — that if Frank wanted Phœbe, Phœbe's father must put no stone in his path. That had seemed a duty then — the more so for its going against the grain; yet now, after Phœbe's unconscious revelation of her own unwise desires, wasn't it both confusingly less of a duty and a more urgent one than ever to coax her into a path less sad and hazardous than she seemed to have chosen for

herself? Or should he — her father, responsible for her existence and so for her welfare as far as he could secure it — should he be wiser to stand quietly aside and let matters take entirely their own course? ... Well, to be sure, that was practically all it was possible to do, when it came definitely to the question of action. Phœbe was twenty-five, and, especially in these post-war days, must be regarded as entirely her own mistress.

Yet it seemed to her father — wistfully regarding the clear line of her eyebrows, the resolute sweep of her straight brown lashes as her eyes again travelled past Roger's head to the darkness beyond — that she could not be considered wholly independent of whatever mastery he might obtain over his own desires. Victory over himself, in however obscure and trivial a direction, must surely react in some degree upon her well-being. There must be more influences to be reckoned with between one soul and another than the merely expressed, felt, deliberately exercised.... Or if not, what purpose was left for the spirit in man to pursue?

IV

Smoking his cigar in the garden after dinner, Mr. Celian was soon joined by his children and his niece, and the four of them strolled with linked arms across the lawn to the gate into the walled garden beyond. The moon had risen clear of the roof-tops above the canal, and its apricot image lay on the surface of the water like a large coin.

'If I were a painter,' said Phœbe, 'I'd paint this garden by moonlight; and if I were a poet I'd write a sonnet to that moonlight spilling itself over this

garden; and if I were a composer I'd compose a symphony putting into music the garden and the moonlight and the canal and how jolly it all is.'

Mr. Celian thought — 'And if you told the truth, you'd like to hurry away from this garden this instant!' But, squeezing her arm, he said, 'Yet without all those things, the jolliness remains.... Lena, what about your poetic frenzies? Can't you supply an ode to meet the case?'

Not forgetting that earlier she had been snubbed, Lena answered briefly, 'No.' Her arm slipped away from Phœbe's hand and she stood still. 'If you're all going farther on, I shall sit here.' She sat down on a wooden bench under an apple-tree and lighted a fresh cigarette.

Roger said, 'I'll stay here too.'

'Let's go as far as the field gate, Guv'nor,' said Phœbe. 'I want to see the moon from there.'

The twisted moon-shadows of the fruit-trees hid her and her father as they passed on along the path, and Roger sat down by his cousin. 'My cigarette's gone out. Give me a light from yours.'

She turned her face towards him. 'Take it, then.'

The cigarette ends met. 'What a wobbly mouth you've got,' said Roger. 'I can't get a light like that.'

She put up a hand to steady the cigarette, and he rested his own against it. 'That's better.... Your hand's cold, Lena. *Are* you cold?'

'Chilly.... Your cigarette's quite alight now.'

'I know it is.... I'll warm your hands. Give them to me — no, damn, I forgot — one at a time....'

She laid her long hand palm upwards on his knee and he gently rubbed the fingers. 'Take this confounded

cigarette out of my mouth,' he said then, and when she had leisurely obeyed he lifted her hand and held it against his lips. 'Does *that* warm you?'

'Moderately.' Her big eyes, very dark in their curiously hollowed sockets, regarded him unsmilingly through the half-light.

He said, 'Are my lips cold?'

'No. Quite warm.'

'What about yours, Lena?'

'Don't you want your cigarette back?'

'No, I don't. Throw it away.'

She tossed it across the path, and its little light glowed up at them from under the edging of box. 'Any more orders, my friend?'

'Yes,' said Roger. 'One.... Throw your own away too and turn your face to me.'

She obeyed again, smiling faintly now with her vivid mouth, but not with her eyes.

'Now,' said Roger under his breath, 'let's find out if your lips are cold.'

She lifted her free hand and laid the back of it against her mouth. 'I think not; no — hardly at all, thanks.'

'Lena.... Damn it all, let me kiss you now. You've made me want to.'

'I've made you? What gross injustice.'

'You have; it's not injustice. You can't help it, I suppose, with eyes like that — with that mouth.... Lena, quickly — they'll be coming back in a moment. ... Do you know, in this light your mouth's like a hollyhock — all velvety and dark.... Oh, *curse* — here they are!'

They drew apart as Phœbe's light dress appeared at the farther gate; and feeling for a fresh cigarette

Roger murmured, 'You are a little devil, Lena! I haven't kissed you for weeks.'

Mr. Celian said, as he drew near, 'It's getting rather damp, Lena; I shouldn't sit there, I think.'

'I was just going in, Uncle Peter.'

'There's the front door bell,' said Phœbe. 'Who's come—?'

Her father's heart—soothed by his walk with her, her hand tucked in his—sank slightly again. 'I imagine it's Frank. I told him to come if he'd nothing else to do. We'd better go in.'

'He can dispense with *us*,' suggested Roger hopefully. 'He'll be quite happy if Phœbe's there.'

'Who's vulgar now?' asked Lena, and stood up. 'I shall go in anyhow. My hands are quite cold.' She lifted one of them, looking down at him gravely, and touched her cheek and lips. 'So is my face.'

Mr. Celian heard his son sigh sharply as he too left the wooden bench. 'We'll all go in, then,' Roger said. 'Only, for God's sake, let's play Bridge—I can't stand F. S. gassing about his "little bus" all night.'

As they moved towards the house, Lena added softly at his elbow, 'Especially as you missed *your* little buss.'

He looked sideways at her, grinning appreciatively. 'You just wait, you jade!'

Frank Somerdew was in the drawing-room, being entertained by Mrs. Celian on the subject of her interrupted Patience, and rose with joy at the others' entry. 'Have I dragged you all in from the garden? I'm awfully sorry—mayn't we go out again?'

'It's damp and rather cold,' said Phœbe firmly, not at all inclined for moonlight saunters with the wrong man. 'Let's play Bridge. Or' — she added sweetly, with a glance at Roger — 'would you rather just talk? How's the new toy, for instance —?'

Roger said to Lena — 'Help me with this' — and dragged forward the card-table. 'It's not good form, F. S., to prattle about rich possessions in the presence of penury.... Now, old lady, are you going to join in?'

Mrs. Celian, who played Bridge with unique incompetence but passionate zest, looked wistfully at the cards. 'There are plenty without me, darling ...'

'Come and cut, Amy,' said her husband. 'I won't play, so that leaves only five.'

Roger ventured — 'And Lena will hold my cards for me, so that leaves only four! ... Will you really? — then come and cut, everybody.... You and I, Mater — now don't begin thinking of to-morrow's breakfast and take me out of "No trumps" into "five eggs" ... Your deal, F. S.'

After being baulked of his kiss it was some compensation to have Lena — so unexpectedly docile — tucked close against him, first arranging his cards and then resting her bare arm along the back of his chair. But Mr. Celian, standing near with the evening paper in his hands, was less satisfied. For he saw the expression in his son's eyes as they turned often to Lena's, and he saw that the hand of her negligently outstretched arm rested lightly against the boy's shoulder. And he disliked both symptoms of an undefined situation very little to his taste.

But he observed also that Lena's gaze — that half-sombre, half-challenging dark gaze — rested more often

on Frank's profile than her cousin's, and he wondered with which of the two young men her mind was the more occupied. Covertly studying her curious face, with the curved white forehead under very smoothly brushed-back black hair, the hollow eyes and red mouth set in pale cheeks which without being too thin were faintly and seductively haggard, he thought, 'A strange child, this.... I wish the strangeness appealed to Frank. But it won't — or not for more than a few idle hours — and I'm afraid to Roger it does. I hope for not much more than those few hours. She could hurt him, if he let her.... What does one know of one's sons —?'

Glancing at Phœbe's self-contained face, remembering it in a less guarded moment earlier in the day, he thought further, 'Or one's daughters either!... What does one really know of any soul but one's own?'

V

SUFFERING habitually from a mild form of insomnia, Mr. Celian — who was optimistic on principle rather than by nature — always laid his head on his pillow with the self-suggestive thought, 'I shall go to sleep very soon.' But the result of this laudable effort was seldom immediate; and on the Saturday night following Somerdew's visit, after mechanically repeating the formula, he lay on his back with his eyes wide open, staring at the uncurtained window, through which the moonlight was staining the polished floor with bars of pale gold.

As he lay there — very still and breathing very quietly, trying to banish all thought from a mind more than usually awake — he became aware of something lacking,

an absence of a familiar accompaniment to his wakefulness which was more disturbing than the missing sound had ever been. And while he drew his brows together in an effort to identify this omission, a very slight vibration of the springs of his bed supplied a clue. The sound he missed was that of his wife's very faint and peaceful snoring; and the vibration of the springs was due to her considerate attempts to conceal the fact of grief.

He said in astonishment, 'Amy, are you *crying?* ... Dear old girl, what's the matter?'

The suppressed shaking, being now unmasked, grew more obvious and the weeping audible.

Mr. Celian raised himself on an elbow, and stretching an arm across his wife's substantial body groped for her hands and gathered them into his. 'I can't allow this. What's the trouble?'

She murmured shakenly, 'I don't want to worry you, darling.'

'You are worrying me. Lying there, you poor plump thing, crying to yourself! Turn round and tell me all about it.'

She obeyed with a little flump that made the bedstead creak. 'Let me find my handkerchief first.... Give me your hand again, Peter.... I'm very stupid, I expect, but — I'm not h-happy about Phœbe.'

'Oh ... Why?'

Mrs. Celian sighed heavily. 'You're a man, darling; you wouldn't notice things, perhaps.'

'What have you noticed?'

'You won't be angry with me —?' urged Amy, who in twenty-six years of marriage had never personally suffered from his anger yet.

'I shall,' he said placidly, 'if you don't explain yourself soon. What's this about Phœbe?'

'I think — I'm half afraid — Oh, Peter, I *know* she's let herself get too fond of someone ...'

'Who?'

'You'll think I'm nasty-minded....'

'*Who,* Amy? — Never mind your dear mind.'

She clasped his hand tightly and whispered, 'M-Martin Holme!'

He heard the name without surprise, except at an acuteness of perception underrated by him; and, stroking her hand, forgetting to reassure her as to the absence of wrath, he made no reply.

'Peter ... do say something — you aren't angry? — you haven't gone to *sleep* —?'

'No, no, of course not.' Drawing in his breath, he lied. 'But I think you're quite wrong, you know.'

'Do you *really?* ... But then you're only her father — mothers have much sharper eyes.... I'm afraid I've seen things — I'm afraid I'm right.'

'Nonsense,' said Mr. Celian, firmly and clearly. 'Moonshine, Amy — like that lovely light out there.... Holme's a very good fellow.'

'Yes, darling; I'm sure he is. But isn't that the best reason for her being fond of him?'

Excluding from his voice any hint of the appreciative smile on his lips, he answered rather lamely, 'I meant that he'd be the last person to — to encourage such a feeling in her.'

'Isn't that just a little Victorian?' Mrs. Celian ventured, very surprisingly to a husband who had long held in affectionate scorn the Victorian tendencies of his wife. 'In these days girls don't wait to be courted

before they fall in love. I think they'd be almost ashamed of themselves if they did. Though it seems to me they might be *wiser* to wait, sometimes.'

'Had they ever really that wisdom?' Mr. Celian wondered. 'Anyhow, Amy, I don't think you need worry. Even if you were right'—he added, determined for the sake of all parties to try and convince her she was wrong—'it would probably blow over in no time. Phœbe's a very sensible girl—not sentimental, not rash or uncontrolled—and Holme's a decent man. ... But I don't believe there's anything in it. Phœbe's got plenty of other fish in her pond—there's Frank, and Christopher Briton, to begin with; she needn't look farther afield just now.'

'She *needn't*, of course. But I'm afraid the men who are there aren't always the men a girl wants.... Oh, Peter, I couldn't *bear* her to be unhappy like that. I'd do anything to prevent it....'

'Don't try and prevent it, though,' Peter advised grimly. 'That wouldn't help matters.'

Her tears suddenly returned. 'Mustn't I? Mustn't I do *any*thing? How can one just s-sit down and see one's children making themselves unhappy? You know I'd walk blindfold into the ca-canal to save them from suffering.... You do know that, Peter, don't you?'

'Yes, my dear. Yes.... But unfortunately, if all the fond mothers in the world—all the fathers too—walked into all the canals, their children's suffering wouldn't really be saved. The simplest, blindest sacrifice won't achieve that.... You see, Amy, pain always comes, in some degree. The mere avoidance of *that* isn't the promotion of happiness, by any means ... by any means ...'

Into the pause his wife's still tearful voice came again. 'But what *can* one do?'

'Nothing,' he said, and drew her against him. 'Forget this fancy and dry your eyes and go to sleep. And don't, I beg, go watching and suspecting our poor Phœbe. She's entitled to her privacy, remember; and she's quite capable of looking after herself. And Martin Holme's got enough to do with looking after that wretched wife of his without straying after other girls.'

He laid his cheek against the plumper one crushed into the pillow. 'Will you obey me — will you put it out of your head and go to sleep?'

On another tremulous sigh, she said, 'I'll try. Perhaps there's nothing to worry about.... Good-night, dear Peter; I hope you'll sleep soon."

But he lay awake for a long time, staring again at the window while the bars of moonlight shortened and crept across the floor, and listening presently to the recovered serenity of his wife's snores. Assured by that sound of her own slumber, he slipped out of bed at last and went to the window. It faced east; and below it, beyond a narrow strip of lawn and gravel path, the canal lay sluggishly pale under the moon. By the bridge the water turned black in its shadow, with one oddly projecting black pillar pointing towards Mulberry Lodge. Craning his head a little to see what caused the projection, Mr. Celian in a moment drew hurriedly back. For the radiance of that September moonlight, clear as pale sunshine, fell on the figure of Martin Holme, where he leaned on the parapet of the bridge with his chin on his hands.

Mr. Celian stepped silently back to bed and reinserted himself between the sheets.

In the intervals, then, between looking after that deplorable wife of his, Martin could still find time for a furtive, desolate, and unrewarded straying after other girls.

VI

To the owner of Mulberry Lodge, the placid and lenient master of its kindly tempered and affectionate household, it seemed by degrees as if a profound change were taking place in that household; a change almost as disturbing as though the canal which brimmed at the garden banks, lazily reflecting the sky in its serene, unhurried, oddly mature and sophisticated face — so different from the restless and youthful River Jenny — had suddenly and secretly changed its nature and betrayed a capacity for obscure upheavals, for varying tides and a purposeful stream. And as little as he could have questioned that water upon its metamorphosis did Mr. Celian feel he could indelicately and presumptuously probe into the sources of the altered aspect in the human beings surrounding him.

Born in an age when children were still regarded as very much the property of their parents, Peter Celian had nevertheless evolved into a very modern father, with views on the liberty of the subject which underwent no modification merely because the subject happened to be his own child. He held that three things, among several lesser ones, were proper and necessary to the best development of human life: pain, experience, and love. To look on at the endurance of the first in those to whom he gave the last was therefore only a part of the continued development of himself, and his own shrinkings must not be permitted to be a drag on the progress of experience in them.

But while his mind assured him of the inevitability of some suffering for his children, his heart — an organ less accessible to reason and philosophy — endured frequent pangs while he observed the symptoms of an approach of that trouble in the near future.

In Roger's case his father hoped the pain would be only brief. He hardly believed that Lena Corry was the type of woman to rouse in her young cousin the profoundest type of feeling, even allowing for the inconsistencies and contrariness of passion which so often upset the calculations of a looker-on. Roger and Lena, he considered, had in their natures the particular kinds of similarity and difference which would tend to lessen rather then strengthen their attraction for each other, even supposing any real attraction existed for Lena at all. Mr. Celian had a great respect for Roger's heart, although, reluctantly, he rated Lena's intelligence a little more highly. Allowing for the predominant quality in each, he concluded that Lena would aim at something more dazzling, in every sense, than his one-armed and unbrilliant son; while Roger's heart was supported by quite enough intelligence to teach him that it could never be really satisfied by any violence of emotion that was not also deep-rooted. Yet hearts, his father remembered again, are still incalculable things, and intelligence is often very tardy in its aid; so that in spite of his analysis, satisfactory enough in theory, Mr. Celian remained uneasy about his boy — an uneasiness not decreased by his suspicion that the daughter of Fanny and Seldon Corry, the fool and the knave, had inherited the knave's qualities more abundantly than the fool's.

Lena's knavishness, he fancied, was particular rather

than general, and was concentrated in the province of sex. But that province is a wide one; and though her uncle did not suspect her of potential crimes, he regarded her dispassionately as a young woman in whom morality, as commonly understood, would always be governed by calculation rather than an ethical code. Such government has its perils for the exploited; and while he believed he judged her accurately there, Mr. Celian did not neglect in her case, either the ever-present hazard of sheer contrariness in human emotions. That hazard on both sides, linked to Roger's generosity of heart and Lena's apparent lack of it, opened a prospect of trouble which, though he tried to dismiss it as absurd, Mr. Celian much disliked to contemplate.

But if no very disastrous issue need be anticipated, the evidences of present unrest were subtly manifest to the watcher, so that the unrest and anxiety were communicated to him. And if he turned impatiently away from that problem he encountered another, which his instinct warned him was of a very different order, not of complexity but depth. Complexity, indeed, hardly seemed to enter into the affair of Phœbe and Martin Holme. Simplicity was rather the keynote of their unobtrusive attitude to each other, but it was also the precise element which convinced Mr. Celian — dejectedly and admiringly — of an undesirable durability in their feelings. He was by no means sure that these had ever been openly declared between themselves. It might be enough for them, in such unpropitious circumstances, to be gloriously and romantically and high-mindedly aware of their situation; simplicity was preserved rather than destroyed by avoidance of direct speech, there being few emotional states which words do not

tend to complicate when action may not be equally direct.

But Mr. Celian doubted uncomfortably whether these secret lovers might not be too human and normal to be long satisfied with a method of love-exchange which probably appealed strongly, at present, to that sense in both which cared for beauty and dignity and chivalry, and — less consciously — a touch of secret romance. And, fearing the time when that appeal failed, dreading the possibilities beyond, Mr. Celian found himself thinking reprehensively — 'Confound that man's sense of duty and his kind heart! Why can't he let his poor wife drink herself to death and give him a chance?'

For of the three men suspected by him of being seriously attracted to Phœbe, Martin Holme was undeniably the most to her father's taste. Frank Somerdew, he often reminded himself, was the most materially suitable, and not a bad fellow in his way — honest enough so far as that quality was understood by him, fairly sensible, fairly intelligent in practical things. But would Phœbe — or her father for her — be content with an honesty that went little deeper than an orthodox principle against dishonest dealing in material affairs; with a common sense that left little space for the gracious follies of imagination; with an intelligence so confined to practical things? ... Mr. Celian thought not. Phœbe was a modern young woman of twenty-five, who kept her soul well disciplined so far as outward display was concerned; but her father's perceptions were acute enough to divine some of the properties of that undemonstrative soul, and he concluded, with a sensation of relief, 'No.... Unless emotion is even more incalculable than I believe it to be, Frank would

still have not a dog's chance with her if Holme had never been born.'

Of Christopher Briton's chances, with Martin non-existent, he was less sure. Dr. Briton was the type of large, silent, solid, and dependable manhood whose attraction for any type of woman could never be quite negligible. A little slow, a little heavy and unheroic of aspect and speech, he was nevertheless moderately clever and very kind, a comfortable friend and the gentlest of sons to a mother whose society might have proved more tiresome to a less patient-tempered man. He lived in a house on the eastern bank of the canal, much smaller than Mulberry Lodge and differing from it in that — similarly sunk below the slope of the bridge — it had a narrow wooden bridge of its own, hung with wistaria, leading from the road to an entrance on the first floor.

The eastern bank of the canal also differed from the opposite side, for a tow-path ran between the water and Dr. Briton's narrow garden, which was sheltered from view by a high wall with trees spreading their branches above it towards the canal. Through a small door in this wall Dr. Briton would sometimes emerge in his leisure moments late in the day, almost filling the aperture with his large frame, to stare thoughtfully at the sunset and its reflection in the canal, whose surface, being always faintly blurred like a glass that has been breathed upon, diffused and softened the brilliance of the sky.

If any of the Celian family were in the opposite garden at such times, they would hail the contemplative figure on the tow-path, and Dr. Briton would remove his pipe, wave it in greeting, and deliver himself briefly

of some prognostication upon the weather to come. He was a shy and unintrusive person, and though in his desire to observe the sunset those qualities did not prevent his leaving his shut-in garden for the tow-path, he had never been known to look directly at the Celians' unscreened grounds until his glance had been sanctioned, to his sense of courtesy, either by a call from some occupant of them or a gradual conviction that they were unoccupied. If Phœbe chanced to be there, sitting, perhaps, on her favourite stump of a tree close to the water's edge, she would call to him — 'Can't you come over for a bit?' And if he had time he would stroll down to the plank bridge and meet her at the gate of her father's field. There they would lean together very companionably, he on one side, she on the other, while she patiently extracted from him, by slow degrees, items of technical information about flowers and birds and stars, varied by details of surgical science which Phœbe, always athirst for knowledge, liked equally to hear.

Mr. Celian was not sure whether she was aware of the fact that this impersonal comradeship was Briton's form of courtship. Phœbe was rather impersonal herself, and not at all ready to assume a special admiration without good cause. But her father supposed there must be certain signs which a beloved young woman must be able to read, even without obviousness; and that she was beloved by Briton he had little doubt. But he knew that the doctor's finances were much crippled by debts left behind by a squandering father, and his courtship was possibly held in check by that circumstance. Yet his practice, though not very extensive, was an improving one, hardly threatened by a

younger man recently arrived on the scene; and if Cicely Briton was now provided for and off her brother's hands, he might feel justified in making his purpose more apparent.

Mr. Celian liked and admired this honourable and hard-working neighbour, and would have wished Phœbe to share his sensations, in more pronounced form, if he had not unfortunately liked Martin Holme a little better. He also believed Martin to be not only far more to her own taste, but better fitted to make her happy if circumstances would only obligingly give him the chance. Yet there was Flora Holme, indubitably in possession, though so tragically for the man she possessed; and there were his admirable and tiresome sense of duty and his kind heart, which kept him patiently at her side, patiently doing his best to save her from her lamentable weakness, and doggedly installing her at intervals in a seclusion from which she emerged only to revert very soon to the habit that encroached on her like a ruthless and malignant disease.

Soames Green knew all about those seclusions from the interim evidence supplied by herself. Her husband must have been perfectly aware of that knowledge, though he confided in nobody, except Dr. Briton, an ideal receptacle for confidences of the kind. Speech was not easy to extract from Christopher at any time, much less on a topic not meant for other ears, and Mr. Celian suspected that even if confidence in his doctor had not been unavoidable, Martin would still have confided in him, from the sheer desire to unburden himself now and then and the conviction of the perfect security of such a vessel for his overflow.

Martin himself was not a talkative young man, but

his reserves and silences perhaps sprang from repression rather than temperament. In the years following the War, from which he had returned to find converted into fact what he had begun to fear as a ghastly possibility, he had necessarily schooled himself to reserve, disciplined his face and guarded his speech. He had only since that return become a resident of Soames Green and an occupier of the End House, left to him unexpectedly by the will of a distant relative of whom the neighbourhood itself had known little during her ownership. A small country town might have seemed to Holme not the best environment for his family skeleton if the inroads on his income incurred in battling with the problem had not made very acceptable this legacy of a comfortable little house and its beautiful contents. But though in early days he held himself aloof from his neighbours, Soames Green — reacting from the first hushed shock of its discovery — developed a liking for the harassed young owner of the End House, pitying him for his double burden of an unmanageable wife and her young sister, whose mental condition was barely covered by the term 'arrested development.'

Mr. Celian liked the companionship of both these younger men; and if Briton had a more soothing effect on the faintly surviving restlessness of his own spirit, Martin Holme's mind, aided by a more extensive and catholic reading than the doctor's, was rather more stimulating. Briton browsed only among such books as fed his appetite for science in any form; and his mental tendencies lacked some of the human twists that most appealed to Mr. Celian, whose interest was

focussed more keenly on Man than on the achievements of Mankind. He found a greater elasticity of perception and idea in Martin Holme, and felt that — allowing also for his more attractive personality — it was hardly in feminine human nature to prefer the rooted stolidity of a Christopher Briton. And yet — and yet —? How could he himself prefer for this beloved daughter a path that led to mere frustration, a doing without all the things that her vigorous, healthy, and intelligent young soul must naturally desire? He did not believe that either she or Martin would contemplate any other path while Flora Holme was alive; and remembering the epigram 'wives and cats have nine lives,' he told himself dejectedly that to hope for Martin's ultimate release would be, though venial enough in the circumstances, at least rather vain and absurd.

He was concerned also for the inward disturbance of Amy. He had done his best to quell her awakened anxiety — awakened by some unwonted maternal sharpening of faculties ordinarily rather obtuse — but he was aware that only her unselfish desire to spare him had persuaded her into enduring these new pangs in secret. For her sake he hoped they were limited to fears for Phœbe, without extending, like his own, to uneasiness about their son. Her continued concealment of anxiety assured him that this must be so; for any doubt of the happiness of her adored Roger could not have been contained unexpressed for more than an hour. Amy loved Phœbe greatly, her husband knew well enough; but her love for Roger — intensified since the boy's disablement — was one of those things that always brought Mr. Celian up against an element in emotion which went beyond his vision and brought a

sensation of tightness to his throat. That in a simple, unclever, relatively insignificant woman such as Amy Celian affection should attain so colossal and God-like a strength, seemed to her husband to wipe away most of his hypotheses upon the universe. One might argue this and one might argue that as to divinity and nature and good and evil and a dozen different things; but the force of a single example of maternal love in a quite unsubtle and unexceptional heart demolished almost everything that could be said. It remained, an intangible yet insurmountable fact, more cogent than any visible fact or audible speech. That love *was;* and before the mute force of its argument all minor contentions went down like autumn leaves in a gale.

Mr. Celian, with a humble reverence for the emotion of love in any form, humbly admitted his wife's superior capacity in this direction. Yet his own affection for his children was now by far the strongest emotion in a heart long almost emptied of all the conflicting sensations that had once filled it to the brim. And analysing, as he sometimes chose to do, this particular sensation, it seemed to him that while pain is a weight in the heart, parental love is an inflation, a distension of that organ, forming a lovely bubble that can never be pricked; that while the weight of pain may finally break the heart that holds it, this divine distension is illimitable and harmless, never to be burst.... And his fancy, following the image, conceived a figure so inflated by the extravagance of many such loves that it appeared almost submerged by a vast bunch of bright-coloured toy-balloons, bobbing and billowing on either side.

CHAPTER TWO

I

PHŒBE CELIAN, bringing her bicycle to a standstill on a small stone bridge above the River Jenny, balanced herself a little precariously against the low parapet and looked down at the water.

The stream was full, rather wider here than among the water-meadows near her home, and at a little distance it branched out right and left into narrow tributaries that danced between reedy banks. There were no flowers now in those banks, but the grass was a deep, wet green, and cattle standing in the fields beyond made red-and-white patches in the sunshine, which still kept the rarefied warmth of mid-October.

Phœbe had been playing golf at Stunridge, and her clubs were slung across her back, their steel faces glinting brightly in the sun. She stared at the water so long that its busy current, bubbling and eddying under her, gave her at last a sensation as though the bridge itself had begun to move and ride steadily upstream. The clarity of that strongly flowing yet shallow water, the marbled effect of its pebbly floor, fascinated her as running water always did; but her mind that day refused to lose itself in pleasant contemplation, refused to detach itself from personal affairs and be soothed into a swaying dream. A very sane and well-balanced young woman as a rule, she was still not too modern and matter-of-fact to be able to indulge in dreams; and though also able to keep the habit in wise

subjection she would ordinarily have given it its head just now. But matters of fact ruthlessly intervened, and her oval face framed in light brown hair was rather mournfully bent above the indifferent and cheerful stream.

The sound of a motor horn failed to disturb her concentration, but the subsequent slowing-down of a car close at hand made her look round, to find Dr. Briton in his shabby Ford at her elbow.

'Hullo!' she said, recapturing the mask of serene insensitiveness common to the modern girl. 'I've been to Stunridge.'

'A good sort of day, this — if you've leisure to enjoy it.'

Phœbe, with more leisure than enjoyment just then, asked, 'You haven't, I suppose? How's Mrs. Slinfold? — I heard she was ill.'

'I've just come from there,' said Briton non-committally. 'No, I never have much time.'

Communication between these two was usually a matter of Phœbe's questioning and Briton's brief replies, which were not always much more enlightening than the present one. But being unable to ask the only question to which at that moment she really needed an answer, Phœbe felt disinclined to embark on any less vital ones; and murmuring only — 'I'm not sure that's a disadvantage' — she dropped her eyes again to the stream.

Briton astonished her then by asking, 'What's the matter, Phœbe?'

She thought, 'I wish I could tell him!' And with a little movement of her heart as she realised that his opening suddenly made the telling remotely possible,

she answered without turning, 'The matter with *me?* Did you think I was going to jump off the bridge?'

'No,' said Briton seriously. 'People like you don't jump off bridges — even if they want to.'

'Well, I don't want to!' She smiled round at him then, and found him looking at her with more gravity than usual. 'What *did* you think?'

He shook his head vaguely. 'Cicely's coming home next month.'

Smiling again at his characteristic irrelevance where he wished to evade, she also smothered a small sigh at the receding of that comforting possibility of 'telling him.' And she said, a little flatly and forgetting to express pleasure, 'So I'd heard. She'll hardly remember us all after six years. Though I dare say we're not much changed.'

'Oh, well... things are a bit different now, I expect.... And there are new people in the town. The Holmes, for instance.'

Phœbe gave her bag of clubs a hitch. 'Yes. Cicely doesn't know them, of course.'

Rubbing the palm of his large hand backward and forward on the steering-wheel, Briton said, 'That's a sad household.'

Phœbe's heart quaked. 'Anything fresh?'

'Fresh and familiar, poor devils.... Mrs. Holme's gone away again.'

'*Has* she?' Phœbe looked round at him suddenly. 'I wonder why you told me?'

'It's not private property. You can't leave Soames Green without Soames Green knowing it within half an hour.'

She coloured faintly, thinking — 'I *am* a fool!'— and

shifted her machine along the wall. 'I only meant one doesn't hear its news first from *you*, as a rule! . . . I must get home to lunch now. Good-bye.'

He started his engine, and in a moment passed her with a friendly wave as she pedalled along the sandy road.

Looking after the car, which travelled like a large insect across the flat landscape, Phœbe thought, 'I do wonder, though, why he dragged *them* in. It wasn't like him. . . . Oh, poor Martin, poor Martin — what's happened *now?*'

Her father, had he heard that exchange of rather vague and purposeless comments, would have wondered less why Briton had dragged in Holme's name; he would have deduced that — spurred on by secret processes of troubled intuition — Christopher Briton had taken a tentative step forward to the extent of a little clumsily trying to extract some new crumb of material, palatable or otherwise, for his intuition to feed upon.

And possibly, when he drove his shabby car homewards between the deep green meadows, leaving Phœbe far behind, he had extracted something to make a little heavy the stolid and gentle heart in his breast.

Phœbe realised at lunch-time that so far from overemphasising his piece of news, Christopher had withheld the main points of it. For Lena greeted her with 'You've missed the topic of the morning!'

'Have I? Not the only thing I missed, then; my mashie-shots — kind heaven, my mashie-shots! . . . Well, what else?'

'Flora favoured the town with a special display and has been sent packing again. Aunt Amy had a detailed recital from the butcher — she'll tell you all about it.'

Helping herself at the sideboard, Phœbe answered, 'I don't know that I'm lusting to hear.' And echoed Briton's — 'Poor devils . . .'

'Dear child,' suggested her mother, '"lusting" isn't a very pretty word, is it?'

'It isn't a pretty story, Amy,' said Mr. Celian, 'so it's the *mot juste*. . . . You'll hear of the episode soon enough, Phœbe; one can't escape such things. . . . I wonder why charming actions haven't the same propensity for magic circulation. No passer-by ever clutches me by the elbow to praise his neighbour's kindness of heart. . . . I'd like some more galantine, Phœbe, as you're up.'

In spite of her assumed indifference, Phœbe was miserably anxious to hear the truth of an affair that had sent Flora Holme away again not very long after her last return. Not for the sake of the details, from which she shrank with a feeling of mingled sickness and pity, but because of its effect on Martin. She hoped that the scene had occurred after he had gone to London, so that he might have been spared the pain and shame of being a witness; yet who but himself would have had the authority to send his wife away —?

She went to the kitchen after lunch, ostensibly to ask for an iron to be heated, in the hope that Rhodes, their garrulous cook, might volunteer the story she would not let herself demand.

She was not disappointed; for while she lingered in the big, pleasant room opening onto the stableyard, Rhodes began with shocked relish, 'That Mrs. 'Olme's been at her pranks again. Had you heard?'

Phœbe murmured, 'Not very much. I know there's been some sort of scene.'

'One of her best, it was,' Rhodes assured her, and described it. Mrs. Holme, it appeared, had slipped out of the house and down to the village before her husband knew she had gone. He had followed her then, and found her at Simmonds the ironmonger's, having, as Rhodes put it, 'a regular set-out, and half the neighbours at their doors.'

'Screaming, she was, Miss Phœbe, and using language, they say, as you'd be surprised to think she'd ever heard, let alone cared to put her tongue to. How she gets hold of the stuff, seeing the care he takes, passes all belief.'

Phœbe asked reluctantly, 'Mr. Holme found her, did you say? That was... dreadful for him...'

'Dreadful indeed, Miss; very derogating to him, as the saying is.'

'What happened then?'

Mr. Holme had got her away and back to the End House, where a further scene took place, ending in her husband picking her up and carrying her indoors. 'He took her away later on — Timpsey's car drove them to Birling Station. Mr. Holme, he'd had a bad time with her all night, they say, and hadn't gone off to his early train for fear of trouble.'

Phœbe leant her forehead against the cool glass of the window and stared out at the hens peacefully stepping and pecking in the yard. Had one to be a hen or a cow or a dog to find peace in the world? ...

'How can he stand it, Rhodes?'

'There's gentlemen,' said Rhodes, holding the iron near her cheek, 'who'd do her in for less. And there's some as would let her go hang.... There's always trouble, Miss Phœbe, where there's marriage — one

sort or another. Though p'r'aps, it's a good thing — something to relieve the monotony, like. I dare say if I'd had the misfortune to have a quiet husband I'd have begged him to take the 'ammer to me now and again, just to spruce things up a bit.'

Too sad to smile, Phœbe said, 'Mr. Holme isn't the sort to use hammers, I imagine. He's very good to the poor thing.... Will you bring the iron to the morning-room, please; I'll get my things ready.'

Later in the day, having finished her ironing and refused Lena's invitation to call on some friends, she went for a walk by herself, her spirits weighted with sympathy for Martin's troubles. She could picture the white endurance of his face as he persuaded Flora away from Simmonds's shop — that square, brown face, with the skin drawn tightly over its bony structure, of which Roger had once said, 'Scratch the soldier and you'll find a priest.'... She had seen that whiteness, that patience, once before when she met him immediately after a minor episode of the kind. She felt profoundly thankful that her golf engagement had taken her out of the town before the thing happened; though she must have missed it only by a narrow margin, having passed Simmonds's on her bicycle at a quarter to ten. How thankful Martin himself must be that she had not been there — unless, of course, he thought about her less than she believed.... But with a little warm swelling of her heart, a happy and painful drawing of her breath, she thought — 'Ah, but I know — I *know*...'

In the orange-tinted dusk, when the western sky near the horizon retained a coppery smear of light and lamps were coming out, like flowers, in the town, she walked slowly up West Street towards her home.

A group of staring loiterers on the bridge drew her past her own gate to join them, but she found nothing more unusual than a barge unloading pine-trunks at the timber-yard opposite Mulberry Lodge. She looked on idly, sniffing the familiar, pleasant smell of wood and sawdust, and admiring the gleaming creamy-white of the freshly sawn trunk ends and the reflection of the barge lamps, some hung so low that light and reflection seemed to run together, forming fat bars of dim gold, their submerged outlines hardly shaken by the sluggishly moving water of the canal.

The scene was so familiar, so suggestive of warmth and comfort and lazy peace, that it brought a little consolation to her disturbed soul. But as she turned away, glancing up the dusk-blurred street, agitation returned again. For she saw Martin Holme.

Walking conspicuously and rather slowly down the middle of the road, he approached without seeing her, his head rigidly erect, his eyes looking straight before him, obstinately and pathetically disdainful, she felt, of either pity or contempt from his fellow-men. His aspect hardly invited a greeting even from her; and for a moment — standing irresolute on the edge of the cobbled side-walk — she was inclined to let him pass without a word. But a cart rattled across the bridge, making him surrender his possession of it, and he almost brushed against her as he stepped aside.

'Hullo, Martin — don't tread on me!' she said, trying to speak with reassuring lightness but finding her voice unusually subdued. 'You're back early to-day.'

'I haven't been to Town,' he answered, and she reviled herself inwardly for her nervous bungling. Of course he hadn't been to Town; he'd been taking Flora

away to whatever sinister quarters received her at such times....

She continued hurriedly, 'Have you had any tea? — I haven't. Do come in and I'll give you some.'

He turned rather desolate eyes upon her. 'I'd better not...'

Phœbe looked quickly away, unable to bear that tired and lonely and hungry glance. 'Nonsense,' she said stoutly, and found courage to take him by the elbow, gently urging him across the road. 'I can't have tea all alone; everybody's out, and the Guv'nor's not back yet.' Her breathless invention failed, but it won her point, and Martin followed her silently into the house.

She left him in the drawing-room and went in search of tea, returning presently with a tray. 'I couldn't find much to eat,' she apologised, avoiding Martin's eye, 'but there are scones and jam and a hunk of cake ...if you're not too hungry —?'

'I'm not hungry at all,' he said, standing near the table with his hands clasped behind him. 'I wish you wouldn't bother with all this, if it's just for me.'

'It isn't,' she assured him, lying cheerfully. 'It's for me too; I've been for a longish walk.'

He took his tea from her without further speech, drank it quickly and sat down a little way off, staring at the floor. Phœbe looked at him searchingly then, and saw in his face all the fatigue and patient bitterness he had hidden from Soames Green as he walked with deliberate conspicuousness down its main street. She thought with a little throb of pride, 'He doesn't mind *my* seeing.... But of course he must know he needn't mind anything with me. We both know; it's not

necessary to say so, or to feel embarrassed for each other about anything in the world . . .'

To confirm her own confidence in this mutual knowledge, this superfluity of any explanation between them, she began to tell him of her round of golf that morning and of how jolly the October day had been up on the range of low Downs above Stunridge, forgetting for a moment — in her desire to smooth that blank pain away from his face — how sharp a contrast existed between her morning's doings, and his.

But he reminded her of it by saying suddenly, without looking up, and with an effect less of interruption than of breaking a long silence — 'You know what happened to me?'

She saw the contrast then and hated herself for so emphasising it to him. 'Yes, Martin. I do know.'

He unclasped his hands and stared at their whitened palms. 'I was in hell for fear you should be there . . .'

She said hurriedly, 'I wasn't. I was half-way to Stunridge by then.'

He nodded. 'Thank God you missed it. . . . Well — I must go home now.' But he remained where he was, and Phœbe suggested, 'Won't you have some more tea first — or a cigarette —?'

'No, thanks. Poor Maggie was a good deal upset this morning, too; I'd better get back and see that she's all right.' He stood up, stretching his arms a little in an unconscious gesture of forlorn weariness; and Phœbe, seeing that action, did not dare to rise for fear she would walk straight into those opened arms. She said, almost involuntarily, 'Will you let me walk home with you, Martin?'

He shook his head, smiling in grateful understanding.

'No, Phœbe dear, I won't let you.... But thank you for making me come in. Good-bye.'

Keeping behind her barricade of the low tea-table, she said, 'Good-bye.'

He came back after he reached the door, to add abruptly in a low voice, 'You do understand, don't you, that I'm most damnably sorry for her? — I don't think only of myself...'

Phœbe achieved a smile of magnificently impersonal friendliness. 'Dear old Martin, of *course*. We all know it very well. No one else would have been so good.'

'Oh — *good!* I'm not claiming any virtue,' he muttered with an abashed glance, and went away.

She sat still for a long time, till the door opened again to admit her father. She was glad that only the small lamp by the tea-table was alight.

'I saw Martin leave the house just now,' Mr. Celian said negligently. 'He's been with you here, I suppose.'

'Yes.'

'Had he anything to say about that distressing business this morning?'

'Not very much. Give me a cigarette, Guv'nor.'

Handing her his case, he suggested, 'I suppose there wasn't very much to say.'

'Nothing that needed saying,' his daughter answered, and shrouded herself in smoke.

II

TAKING advantage of a recently increased zest for Bridge on Lena's part, Phœbe spent the evening with a book by the fire. But her customary common sense

and aversion from futile dreaming were not proof just then against the disturbing quality of the day's events, and though she tried to concentrate on the page under her eye the attempt was not very successful. For Martin's face constantly intervened, and Martin's voice saying 'Phœbe dear' echoed in her comforted ears, obliterating the small sounds of the Bridge-players close at hand.

Yet though from one aspect she was profoundly comforted — as if, sitting now separated from him, his hand lay over hers, making tangible her mere spiritual certainty — anxiety was increased by the perfected knowledge of his love for her. While the undeclared conviction of that shared emotion lay between them, not like a shadow, but a grateful shade, the hazard of it could still be in a sense dismissed and ignored. But a spoken recognition, she was old enough to realise, would at once lend a different and less ideal complexion to the affair. It would tend to become definitely an 'affair' where before it had only been an innocent and beautiful dream. And, temperamentally averse from secrecy of deed, though not of dreams, Phœbe determined — sitting quietly there with her unread book in her hands — that the question of deeds must never arise. Without personal experience of intrigue, she knew intuitively that such things give to human passion far less than they take away; and since in the accumulated strength of her affection for Martin his own integrity had grown to be more vital to her than mere possession, any act which threatened that perfect integrity must be regarded as impossible. She saw clearly enough that the possibility or otherwise rested mainly with herself. If she idealised him to some extent, it was only in the

sane and temperate fashion that characterised all her emotions, and she could still understand that even the best of men are seldom strong enough for two when the other is a woman. The preservation of the finest qualities in love was, therefore, in her eyes, the special department of women. For her modernity, while it taught her to respect the rights of her sex, had also taught her to respect its special talent for loving; and the true Emancipation of Woman seemed to her to lie in a wider opportunity to achieve equality of excellence rather than to usurp men's freedom to indulge their weaknesses. She had no old-fashioned and romantic illusions as to which was the weaker sex, but having found one man who appeared to her much better than most men, she was determined to keep him so if she could.

But, being unable to subdue her mingled exaltation and disturbance, she shut her book at last and slipped away to the garden. Shrouded in a clammy mist, with no moonlight now, the familiar paths and lawns wore a rather strange and sombre air, a little hostile and forbidding; and when she reached the field-gate and leant on it, staring into the darkness and mist that hung above the fields, her exaltation disappointingly died down, leaving her chilly and apprehensive and sad. Turning her face towards the west, towards the spot where, behind its neat hedge, the End House stood in outward tranquillity, but hiding a heart no less disturbed and sad than hers, a sudden rush of pity for Martin — so harassed and lonely — blinded her eyes with tears. And stretching her hands out into the silent obscurity beyond the gate, she laid her cheek on her arms and softly wept.

Mr. Celian found her there presently; for when Bridge was over, he had missed the studious figure by the fire, and with a sure instinct had gone in search of her.

The wet grass muffled his footsteps, so that, absorbed in her quiet crying, she did not hear him till he was close at hand. In the very faint light he saw her lift a startled face and then turn the pale crescent of it quickly away. Leaning on the gate at her side he laid an arm across her waist and said prosaically, 'My child, you'll catch cold.'

'I'm quite warm.... It's rather — jolly out here.'

In the damp and oppressive darkness Mr. Celian's lip curled. 'Not quite to my taste, Phœbe.... Won't you come in now?'

'Not *just* yet ...'

His heart, inflated — like the toy-balloon of his fancy — with love for her, held also the ache of compassion; and pressing her waist, looking straight before him, he murmured, 'Are you unhappy, my sweet?'

He felt a tightening of her muscles and heard her indrawn breath. 'Yes; a little ...'

'You can't tell me, I suppose? ... Ah, but of course I know.'

'You *know?* Oh darling, *do* you know? But you can't ...'

'You poor little ostrich, I can! But I'm sure no one else does.' For the sake of her peace of mind he lied, knowing that the most loving daughter seldom cares for the most loving mother to be aware of such matters as this; and of Christopher Briton his lie might be truth.

Phœbe murmured, 'Have I made it so plain —?'

'Not a bit. But I have an occult eye!'

She moved a hand and clasped his against her waist.

'You're a darling.... But I wish you didn't know. It'll worry you."

'Parents are born to worry, my dear; it's all they have left.... But *your* worrying matters most. Do you want to tell me anything about it — how matters stand between you? Say nothing, if you'd rather not.'

'There's nothing to tell. And nothing to be done. ... He hasn't ever said one word; he wouldn't and won't — he's not that sort. But I just know — we both know — how things are."

Staring with small, cold eyes into the darkness pressing down upon the fields, Mr. Celian said gently, 'My experience, Phœbe, tells me to say —" then rest content with that."... Language is a strange thing; words are weapons — better leave them alone where happiness can't really be served by speech. This silence of yours, this dumb knowledge, is a beautiful thing. Keep it.... That's what my experience advises; but another department of it reminds me that no one ever follows that advice — they speak and spoil.... And my affection for you is just as contradictory; I want your happiness and I want your peace."

'Do they *never* go hand in hand?'

'Not very often, I'm afraid, where conscience has any chance to prick!'

'If I can help it,' said Phœbe, with her face still turned away, 'his shan't have the chance.'

Peter Celian's mind, travelling a long way back, remembered how he had once put the comfort of a woman's conscience before all other desires. And he thought, with a faint glow of pleasure and pride, 'That

obscure and difficult act may have borne, at long last, this healthy fruit.... How can we know what virtue propagates?'

He said aloud, 'I think you're very wise. And it probably rests with you.'

Phœbe laughed. 'I've believed that myself. But you give away your sex!'

'I flatter yours, though — its strength and its charms ... I shall go in now; this is too damp for me. Are you coming too?'

'Very soon,' she said. 'Leave the garden door ajar; I'll bolt it when I come in. Good-night, darling.'

She leant her cheek for his kiss and he turned to go, but her voice stopped him again. 'Guv'nor dear, you *do* like him, don't you —?'

'No one better,' said Mr. Celian; adding from the depths of his exasperation with circumstance —'And I wish that woman were at the bottom of the sea!'

Phœbe answered soberly, 'Ah, but she's not. One has to keep remembering that she's not.'

Moving dejectedly away, he murmured. 'No. That's just it.'

As he recrossed his field, finding the path with difficulty in that thick darkness, he thought in mingled pleasure and concern, 'That's a dear girl — a sane, sound, decent girl. It's great good fortune to have a daughter like that.'

III

Upon the surface of a normal and average community such as Soames Green the emotional crises of its individual members trace no very visible or lingering pattern; and even the too-public affairs of Flora Holme,

though these formed periodically the staple topic of her neighbours, gradually found their own level as no more than an item of agreeable gossip.

But to Mr. Celian, whose eye was not average or confined to the mere exterior of things, it was at once a matter of relief and amazement to realise how little is habitually reflected by that exterior of the upheavals within. Standing uneasily in the midst of what he felt to be impending emotional complications, he sometimes found it incredible that his friends and his children's friends should be so unconscious of matters which, recognised, would be a feast for their speculation and their tongues. For to a world in which human nature, though so inexhaustible in variety, is yet the element that shows the least tendency to fundamental change, no ephemeral excitement of politics, war, finance, science, or art has the same relish for the palate as the intimate concerns of human nature itself. Other interests demand a degree of specialisation; but the consideration of who loves or hates or has cheated or murdered his neighbor is hardly beyond the scope of even the dullest specimen of mankind.

Yet, ignorant of the disturbances centring in Mulberry Lodge just then, Soames Green pursued its everyday affairs as though such things as love and hate and death were entirely alien to its knowledge of life.

'So,' Peter Celian reflected, 'the colossal pretence about life everywhere goes on. Surface, surface! Preserve at all costs the illusion or convention that nothing else exists... cover up real life with all the contrivances that fear raises between itself and reality. Life's a naked thing, to some minds — improper, only fit to be ignored. So eat, drink, and be merry, for to-

morrow we die. But " die " mustn't be breathed except in jest; it's too near reality again, too suggestive of a conception the average mind can't face. Nothing! In any department of life that's sometimes a hard word to bear, but as applied to the issue of death it's not to be endured!'

For himself the word and its connotations were far from being draped in terror or even distaste; He viewed and accepted them philosophically and with a touch of both melancholy and relief. Apart from the pleasure he took in his children, life had long seemed to him rather like a toy, which must be grown out of and yielded up to death without a sigh. Yet, except for a period following upon his youthful renunciation, he had not been actively unhappy, and he had found many pleasant things to beguile his never quite vanished sense of loss; he had certainly done his best — sometimes consciously and sometimes only by means of his inherent kindliness — to contrive that the people for whose well-being he was responsible should not suffer from a like sense of deprivation. But he did not flatter himself that he had succeeded beyond the average, or believe that any amount of effort could ensure compete success. Pain and loss and sadness and disappointment were indigenous to the soil of that limitlessly varying region called Life, and the best a fellow-liver could do was to try to offer compensations here and there, try to lift loads and shift pains a little by the leverage of sympathy and charity. Beyond that — nothing! — the intolerable word once more. It seemed to him far more intolerable in relation to life than to death, in which state — if it indeed held nothing — the desolation of it would no longer be felt as a conscious pain.

For his own part he was not only undecided about but almost indifferent to the problem of that after-death nothingness. As a rationally thinking man he could conceive of no other conclusion to existence; but as a romantic and human-hearted person, he hoped that it might after all be the beginning for himself of the real happiness he had surrendered long ago. Yet his imagination pictured so many obstacles in the way — even a vision of poor Amy's wistful perplexity at beholding him in the glory of a joy not bestowed by her — that he felt it might be more satisfactory for everybody if no future happiness offered at all, and all desire for it ended with the perishing of human frames. Too many and too insoluble complications must surely ensue in conditions where souls were said to revert, eternally, to 'their own.' Somebody was bound to be dissatisfied. ... Yet sometimes, with a responsive stirring of one very special compartment of his heart, he would think — 'But I'd be very glad to find Margery again ...'

Within a week of the day that had been brightened for Soames Green gossips by the episode of Flora Holme, the town was no less agreeably animated by the holding of its annual Lawn Tennis Club Ball, the most important function of the dancing season and one at which non-dancing people gathered for Bridge, and best dresses emerged.

Mrs. Celian welcomed both opportunities with a zest which would have been becoming in many a blasée young woman of twenty-one. She adored Bridge, playing it with immense inefficiency, but a placid sweetness that almost disarmed criticism, and she equally loved pretty clothes; though until recent years she had denied herself in that direction so that her family might the

more gloriously appear. But of late she had a little broken out, as she guiltily admitted; and for the occasion of the Lawn Tennis Dance she had been long and secretly in the hands of her dressmaker, hiding the details of her new gown even from her daughter and niece, to add to her own pleasure in its charms.

Phœbe — who took the subject of clothes a little carelessly, though she achieved happy enough results — was playing golf at Stunridge on the day of the dance, and only returned late in the afternoon, when her mother was already excitedly sequestered in her room. Even then she stood for some time at her window looking down at the canal before she dressed, and it was with a sense of depressed apprehension that she began to take off her outdoor things. For during the past week she had seen nothing of Martin Holme and had no idea whether he would be at the dance. She knew that she would probably enjoy herself, after a fashion, in any case, but in his absence the enjoyment must for once be rather a colourless thing. Yet if he were there, she wondered a little breathlessly how they would be able to keep apart for even a single dance.... Had she enough strength of mind to guard him against malicious tongues — *now*, after the illumination of that isolated 'Phœbe dear' in which her soul had basked, precariously, ever since? ... For the sake of their own safety from each other and his preservation from evil-speaking, she almost — in a self-abnegating moment — hoped he might stay away from the dance altogether. But a moment later, seeing her reflection in the powder-blue frock that brought out bright lights in her ash-brown hair, human nature reasserted itself, and she thought — 'I do look rather nice.... Oh, Martin, please be there!'

IV

LENA, after dressing with her usual leisurely attention to detail, arrived in the drawing-room when only Roger and his father had appeared. Mr. Celian saw Roger's face change as she came in, and he turned to look at her, wishing he could feel more sympathy with the emotion that had brought such evidence of it into his boy's eyes.

Lena had paused half-way across the room and was regarding the two men in a grave and assured silence. Her dress was of lavender silk, delicately and almost imperceptibly shot with rose; the skirt stood out a little from her small hips, giving her at once an old-fashioned and a very modern air, and she wore no ornament except an oval miniature of her mother swinging from a black velvet ribbon. That ingenuous, almost childish decoration, which made her neck very white, emphasised also the same blend of past and present in her face. For, beautifully poised on the delicate stalk of her neck, Lena's face — with its curving white forehead under black hair brushed straight back and brought forward in two thick puffs covering her ears — was not only that of an ultra-modern and sophisticated woman, but also the expression of an undying type of feminine charm. The clothes, the manner, the speech, had changed — Mr. Celian thought — but not the instincts, not the soul, since the days of Eve....

The curved lines of her secret mouth were very red and her eyes very dark, a little hollow, a little wistful in spite of the self-possession of her uncandid gaze. That absence of candour was not disagreeable and not suggestive of any furtiveness, but rather of a pregnant

reticence; her eyes seemed to reserve because they might have so very much to say.

Mr. Celian thought as he stared at her, admiringly if with no pleasure of affection, 'She's utterly out of her element down here; she's not for Roger and quiet ways.'

He said aloud: 'You look very well, Lena. But if I may say so, you've overdone the colour on your lips.'

She drew nearer, opening those lips in a faint smile. 'Then Nature's to blame, Uncle Peter, for I've added nothing. Kiss them, and see if the red comes off!'

'I'll take your word for it,' he said, 'and apologise — and congratulate Nature.'

Summoning a small grin, Roger suggested, 'Let *me* try!'

'Like this, then.' She lifted his hand gravely and kissed it. 'There's no stain, you see.'

Roger turned crimson. 'Not a fair test,' he managed to say lightly, pulling his hand away. 'Hullo, Phœbe — I say, your two dresses are like a bit out of a Russian ballet.'

Glancing at his daughter, Mr. Celian thought, 'Could two girls resemble each other less? Yet their mothers were sisters.'

He wished, as he looked lovingly at Phœbe out of his cold blue eyes, that he could love his niece too. She had been for him always a dimly discordant element in his comfortably united household, even when he first took charge of her as a thin and hollow-eyed little girl of thirteen. She was not unruly, not quarrelsome or conspicuously selfish, then or later; but he received always a disquieting impression of an alien temperament pursuing its secret and self-concentrated existence behind the outward docility that passed well enough

for good behaviour with his less critical wife. There was in Lena some force, some obscure greed of power — perhaps for its own sake — which, gradually suspected by him as she grew up, affected him unpleasantly and was associated in his mind with something half mediæval and dark, absurd as such a fancy seemed. Part of her life had been still more obscured for him by absence, for at eighteen she had developed a sudden independence and gone to live in London to study painting with the daughter of one of her dead mother's friends. Soames Green saw her very seldom during that time; but she returned to Mulberry Lodge — having lost interest in art and turned to literature — before the War ended, and volunteered to help on the clerical staff of the local hospital, where Phœbe had long been inconspicuously scrubbing floors and making beds. Since then she had rather surprisingly remained at home, sketching a little and writing a good deal, and disclosing no more of the real background of her personality than before she went away.

Mr. Celian wondered whether Roger, in his recently developed character of admirer, genuine or spurious, had reached any nearer the realities of that personality than any one else in the neighbourhood. He imagined not, since — so far as he knew — Roger's attentions met with no very satisfactory result; even if they did, he fancied that Lena would never perfectly reveal herself to anyone but a husband, and then only if she no longer cared enough about him to keep him, alluringly, a little in the dark. He wished in any case, that Roger need not be worried and depressed and disturbed, as, notwithstanding a concealment that served very well for the superficial onlooker, his father knew him to be. Possessing

only the very limited knowledge of his young son's sexual tendencies that most fathers acquire, Mr. Celian was nevertheless fairly confident that Roger was not a shallow-souled philanderer, and that if he wanted Lena it was with an honest idea of and desire for permanence, even though idea and desire might both be a mistake or a phase. And, glancing again at that odd face of hers, which held so much and gave so little, he recognised clearly enough that for a boy of imagination and feeling her personality might well have a strong enough pull to lead to permanence — other attainments being ruled out — however disastrous the ultimate result might prove.

Certainly for the moment Roger was enduring the pain of some sort of emotion on her account, and Mr. Celian shared it as he looked on. He hated Lena for that hand-kissing, which he read as a deliberate intention to inflame and wound, not acquitting her of complete awareness of Roger's state — much more complete, indeed, than her uncle's could be, since his must be only surmise.

He was relieved when Frank Somerdew arrived and Mrs. Celian came down at last in all the conscious glory of her grey satin and Parma violets. She looked very contented and comely and kind, and Peter was glad to think that her anxiety for Phœbe was momentarily set aside by her naïve and girlish preoccupation with her new clothes. As they all turned towards the dining-room, he tucked his arm under hers and kissed her cheek. 'You look a charming old wench!' he said, and was amused and touched to see the pleased colour deepen in her face.

He had another moment of the kind later on, while they drank their coffee round the drawing-room fire.

For as he sipped his own, not attending much to the conversation, he heard Amy's voice suddenly intervene.

'You young people' — it said — 'talk a great deal of nonsense about marriage. It's this and it's that — or it ought to be this or that — but what do you actually *know?* ... I can tell you one thing, anyhow; a happy marriage is really only just living with your best friend and sharing early tea instead of cocktails!'

On the heels of a little chorus of amused comment, Phœbe added, '*Dear* Mummie, I can't believe that you two ever shared cocktails when the Guv'nor was courting you!'

Mrs. Celian, beaming with gratification at her success and furtively smoothing her satin lap with happy hands, answered comfortably, 'Oh, well, I only put that in to be topical.'

Setting his cup down, her husband leant sideways to grope for unnecessary coal in the scuttle at his elbow. He was profoundly touched and humbled by that unexpected tribute to their long and uninspired domesticity together, and he felt a slow, shamed colour creep up his cheeks to his receding grey hair. 'Living with your best friend ...' Had this marriage of theirs impressed Amy like that? — this marriage which for himself had involved so many secret exasperations and disappointments.... He felt as though he must in some sense have cheated her that she could remain so beautifully deluded, so charitably and tenderly blind to his shortcomings and the deficiencies of the marriage itself. He must surely have failed and tried her many times in very many small ways, even if she had all along failed to recognise his prime failure to love her as she had a right to be loved. In his modesty it

did not occur to him that he might at least take credit for having somehow seen to it that those small failings and irritations had not disturbed her fundamental serenity, her secure conviction of personal and mutual happiness.

Before that revealed simplicity and generosity he experienced a faint pain at the base of his throat, a constriction that he recognised with alarm as an inclination to shed tears. And, at the moment of recognition, the fire he was feeding with needless lumps of coal ran together in a red blur from the sudden moisture of his eyes.

'Dear Peter,' Amy reminded him, 'you needn't keep the fire up, you know; we shan't be back till the small hours.'

V

WHILE those hours were not yet small, he deserted his Bridge table and went down to the ball-room. Standing in the doorway, undecided whether to humour his imperishable fondness for dancing, he watched the couples going by, and discovered presently that his son and daughter were not among them. Mentally pairing them, in some corner, according to his assumptions, these were presently upset by the sound of Lena's voice, and he saw her pass close by, dancing with Martin Holme. The partnership surprised him, for Lena had consistently ignored a man he had expected her to single out; and a faint discomfort crept upon him as he watched their progress round the room, fully alive to the attraction of that small white face with its bulging forehead and gleaming black hair. He disliked its proximity to the shoulder he coveted for his daughter's

leaning, and felt a stab of vexation with Martin for achieving it. But he thought, relenting, 'Poor fellow, perhaps he's only bulwarking himself against his real desire.... Where's that child of mine?'

He saw her presently, sitting silently with Roger in a distant window-seat. Both their faces were turned towards the ball-room; and in each of those faces, both fair and young, much alike at that moment, he saw the faint blankness which he knew to be a screen for feelings they wished to hide. Upon Phœbe, by virtue of her sex, the disguise sat best, but for her father's sympathetic penetration it was still too thin; and as Lena passed him again, her face lifted just then to Martin's, he thought apprehensively, 'What the devil is she after now? — is she trying to get her foot in there too?'

He feared that this niece of his, the secret of whose personality had long been obscured for him, was by instinct or definite inclination — or both — an inveterate poacher on other women's preserves. He had had a suspicion earlier in the year that Frank Somerdew's emerging preference for Phœbe had stirred her cousin to lazy competition; a suspicion, too, that the slightly fluctuating nature of Frank's pursuit had been influenced by the force of Lena's intrusion, and he had more than once hoped that the force would be strong enough to avert what he regarded as, in an unmaterial sense, a calamity for Phœbe. Now, guessing at Lena's intuition of Phœbe's state of heart, he wished more than ever that his partner's affections would deflect and concentrate on the elder girl, so that — her greed momentarily satisfied — she might leave Phœbe and Martin alone. That was a relation, however incomplete

and undesirable and foredoomed, that he should hate to see intruded upon, tampered with, vulgarised. Phœbe had quite enough to contend with already....

Sighing, he threaded his way across the room to his daughter's side. 'Will you dance with me, Phœbs?'

'I hoped you'd come,' she said, her face brightening at once. 'Roger's not very amusing to-night!'

Mr. Celian refrained from observing that a brother was not the person he expected her to depend on for entertainment in such a place; but with his arm round her he paused to say, 'Here's Frank coming for you — would you rather have him?'

She answered hurriedly, 'Oh, no — dance with me, please.'

As he held her firmly against him, not subscribing to the modern fashion of more gingerly embraces, compassion and love for her filled his breast. And the utter impotence of the most perfect love to secure happiness for the object of it, struck him afresh as one of the first tragedies of life.

Lena was saying to Martin as they sat together on the coping of a little terrace in the garden, 'Do you realise that we haven't danced with each other for nearly ten years? Why have you neglected me so long?'

'I've always gathered it was your express wish.'

'I see....Men aren't very good at gathering, you know. It isn't very safe for them to trust in their funny reasoning powers.'

'I dare say not,' said Martin, 'but I suppose they have to trust in anything they've got.'

'Poor dear, helpless, limited beings!' She turned

a small smile upon him in the darkness that was cut by shafts from the lighted windows. 'More especially poor — and dear — you.... You *have* made a deplorable mess of your affairs, Martin.'

'Did *I* make it — precisely?' he asked, letting some of his reticence slide with a sensation of relief.

'Indirectly, yes — certainly. You might have understood what you were in for from the first.... And quite apart from that — weren't you in just a little bit of a hurry to... compensate for an old loss by new possession? Mightn't you have given — things — a rather longer chance?'

'Longer than two years? Oh, come, Lena, did you ever give me any encouragement to wait — to hope for *another* change of mind?'

'I was only eighteen...'

'What does that imply?'

She lifted her mother's miniature and passed its smooth surface up and down the cheek nearest him. He was reluctantly reminded of the smoothness of the cheek it caressed. 'I didn't marry any one else,' she murmured indefinitely, looking up at the sky above the roof of the Town Hall.

Martin shifted sideways, staring at her with a quickened heart and a sense of faint apprehension in his mind. 'And what does *that* imply?'

'You do want things in black and white,' Lena gently complained. And having a genius for the right moment of departure, she let the miniature drop back to its place on her breast, adding, 'Shall we go in now?'

The thought of that bright ball-room, with Phœbe in it, yet not to be danced with just because he wanted to so much, filled him with depression. Lena, with her

unperished charm and even with her embarrassing reminders of that charm at its height, was at least an escape from the empty and difficult task of avoiding Phœbe. And surely he needn't avoid Lena too, since she no longer desired it? So he said, 'Will you dance with me again? — or am I monopolising you too much?'

'It's rather fun to be monopolised,' she admitted candidly, moving to the door. 'I don't often let it happen.... Yes, I'll dance with you as much as you like. Not to flatter you unduly, you're the best dancer here.'

Inside the room they passed Phœbe exchanging her father's partnership for Frank's. Lena murmured negligently, 'I wonder when *that* will come off?'

Martin affected not to hear, but, with an upward glance at the face she had once known very well, she easily saw through the pretence. And drawing away from his arm, she said, 'Don't let's dance for a moment. I want to say something.' She sat on a little sofa and drew him down with a hand on his sleeve. 'Martin, tell me this: have you kept your promise?'

'My promise — ?' He echoed her vaguely, his thoughts having totally left her and jealously followed Somerdew. 'Wasn't the main promise between us broken by you?'

'Broken, yes.... But condemned to permanent wreckage by *you*.'

He gave her his whole attention then, with again some inward uneasiness. 'Are you suggesting, my dear Lena, that your breakage was mendable, after all?'

'Oh, I only suggest that you were a little unflatteringly docile in accepting the fact that it wasn't!'

'I must think that out,' he said, laughing. But the result of thought, while it obscurely flattered him, brought further disturbance to his mind, for, if his interpretation soothed a hurt in the past, it seemed to lead in rather alarming directions for the future. Hadn't Lena told him, in effect, that she now half-regretted her breaking of their undivulged engagement ten years ago? ... Kindness might, of course, be the basis of her unexpected candor; not ignorant of that 'mess' in which he had involved himself, she might conceive it comforting to know, much too late, how agreeably the mess might have been avoided. Even so she was wholly at fault, not knowing how far he had travelled since those days; he was not twenty-two now, but thirty-two, and most soberly and unchangeably in love with Phœbe Celian.... But if Lena's motive were reversed — if candour were the basis of her present kindness — where did that lead? ... Not easy to make it clear to her, if her own affections had begun to revive, that even if release from his mess ever came to him he should not turn to *her*.... The mess seemed to him just then even more deplorable than she could suppose.

Lena murmured, 'Time! You must have "thought it out" by now.'

He shifted the ground of enquiry, nervous of pursuing her own. 'What promise did you mean?'

'Only a minor complication of honour! Only not to tell anyone I ever made or broke promises to you.'

'Oh — that.... Of course I haven't told anyone.'

'Not even Phœbe?' she asked, conscious that she took a risk.

But his instant carefulness for Phœbe, restoring his

caution and reserve, shut him out from more complex suspicions. 'Phœbe Celian? Certainly not. She's not' — he added with galling truth — 'a confidante of mine.'

'I only meant she's the sort of person people do confide in — very reliable and kind.'

His emotions responded to her intention, and he at once felt more warmly towards her as he thought with sharp tenderness of Phœbe. 'I dare say she is.... You're friends, then? Do *you* confide in her?'

'Not to the extent of neutralising your own reserve!' Lena added with a yet more disarming wistfulness, 'As for being friends... you must ask Phœbe that. I don't think she cares for me much.'

'Doesn't she? Do you get on no better in that household than in old days? — Surely Roger likes you a good deal?'

'Oh, yes. Roger likes me — in a way.'

Martin was left wondering how far she might be indifferent to that liking. For, as with her material departures, Lena knew when to leave a spiritual situation indefinite. She stood up now, with a little shake of her shoulders, dismissing the topic, though not the speculation in his mind. 'I'm getting cold. Let's dance again.'

VI

Of the party from Mulberry Lodge only two derived any real enjoyment from that evening, and these two in very different ways.

Mrs. Celian, happy in her grey satin and the knowledge that a number of 'young things' were finding

pleasure in slithering about the ball-room in each other's arms, remained blissfully at her Bridge table, with intervals of being led to the supper-room, and for the occasion contrived to forget that illicit arms might too constantly be encircling her daughter and bestowing illicit joy. Her soul took a holiday from its vigilance in respect to Phœbe's happiness; dances were vaguely apprehended in her mind as licensed opportunities for the wrong young people to be together for a time, and had she shared her husband's knowledge of just how wrongly, in his view, Martin Holme was almost exclusively partnered, Mrs. Celian's anxiety for Phœbe would have succumbed to sheer indignation at her supplanting. Not a modern type of mother in some respects, she was yet quite human enough to resent any hint of shadow for her child's charms and to be up in arms against anybody who cast the shade. But in the tempered glow of light above the Bridge tables, in the delicious agitation of fingering her cards and weightily wondering whether it might be wisest to trump her partner's trick for fear her little ewe trump should fail to score, she was removed from complications less under her own control. And, impervious to criticism, replying to all questions and reproaches with a placid — 'I thought it best' — she accumulated, amazingly, a little hoard of shillings and was beamingly content.

The source of Lena's satisfaction in the passing of those same hours was more subtle and secret, and her pleasure brought no change in the unreadable mask of her self-contained face. Yet Mr. Celian, sourly regarding her from time to time, seldom finding her partnered by anyone but Holme, imagined that he read some

dark and mischievous joy beneath her unaltered front. He could laugh at or chide himself for the extravagance of his fancy, but could not dismiss it as nothing more than that; and glimpses of Phœbe's aspect drove away the laugh. Phœbe's face rarely held any colour; her skin was of that pale yet warm fairness that under a light bloom of powder takes on a tinge of gold, healthy, yet delicately fine. It was for her father one of her greatest outward charms, though he worshipped also the firm slenderness of her body and the direct, candid, boyish clarity of her brown-fringed eyes. Contrasting these with Lena's — dark, faintly hollow, and wholly enigmatic — he thought always of a wild flower, wet with rain, compared with some unnamed southern bloom.

But that night, as time passed, Phœbe's pallor lost a little of its freshness, and her gaiety, though not permitted to flag, struck him as being only gallantly assumed. Into his mind, ordinarily tolerant and gentle both by nature and long discipline, crept a feeling of reproach against Martin and something not far from hatred of his niece. Disturbing, discordant, alien, she had always very privately seemed; and now he felt that her potentiality for the sort of mischief he labelled evil was in progress of becoming fact. His mind remained a little vague as to the precise form such evil might take, but though he was ashamed of his morbid fancy, it stayed with him, and the atmosphere of his imaginings seemed to cling about his niece like a scent, more strong than the actual scent of violets that reached him from her whenever she passed.

Late in the evening he tried a small experiment, but got little result for his pains. An interval in the dancing had brought Martin and Lena — still unseparated —

close to where, too restless and perturbed for Bridge, he stood squarely in the doorway of the ball-room. Phœbe was close by, waiting while Frank went in search of more cigarettes, but Mr. Celian turned his back on her and spoke to his niece. 'Are you going to dance with me to-night, Lena, or are uncles barred?'

She answered with the charming air of deference which he admitted she usually adopted towards him. 'I'm only waiting to be asked, Uncle Peter.'

'This one, then,' he said, and invited her with his arm, ignoring possible pre-engagement, as the music began.

If engagement existed, she too ignored it, without a backward glance at Holme. 'One of the very best tunes,' she said, and gave Mr. Celian her hand.

Over her head his eyes went back triumphantly to those two left behind. Frank had not returned, and Martin, after a moment's hesitation, crossed the doorway to Phœbe's side. But if he asked her to dance she must have refused, for they remained standing there, a little separated still and not looking at each other, though they exchanged a few words. And in a minute Dr. Briton offered himself to Phœbe and carried her away. Martin stood staring at nothing, with a blank face, and presently drifted out into the corridor. His abstention from the partnership Mr. Celian's experiment designed for him was obviously not due to lack of opportunity, for Phœbe had abandoned Frank for Christopher under his very eyes. And Mr. Celian, his triumph fallen, thought helplessly, 'The fool! — what's he about to hurt her like that? ... Or am *I* the fool? ...'

He said to Lena, with underlying grimness, 'Having a good time?'

'Yes, I think so,' she answered temperately. 'Don't talk yet, Uncle Peter; your dancing's too good.'

He thought — 'The little flattering minx!' — but knew that he was not insensible to the flattery all the same. Her own dancing was much more than good, and whatever spell her clever tongue might have to weave at other times, he had to admit it could safely rest while her feet moved. It impressed him suddenly as very sad that this cleverness and this charm, which he could always feel without being influenced by, should be inexorably governed by a temperament that chose to turn them to dubious advantage — if his secret judgment was correct. Her powers, not ignobly used, might have made of her a fine young thing. Yet did he judge her rightly? What had she ever visibly done to earn his constant disparagement? . . . He gave himself, while they danced, to a would-be impartial appraisement of her personality and its probable effect on himself if he had not been her uncle or obstinately biassed.

The hand lying in his palm was cool and very smooth, long-fingered, firm; her arms, bare to the shoulder, were round in spite of their childish thinness, and very white against his dark sleeve. Her hair, close to his cynically curved mouth, was black and smooth and shining, and faintly scented; it lacked the soft wildness of Phœbe's hair and could never have tempted him, as he thought Phœbe's would had he been an eligible young man, to lower his head and lay his cheek against it. But this smooth and sophisticated dark head must, he knew — were he a young man and not Lena's uncle — have stirred him in a different way. And that inscrutable face beneath, of which, dropping his eyes, he could see the fine, faintly haggard outline —? Oh, undoubtedly, a

young man, not her uncle, might well find in that face — pale, yet perfectly healthy, assured, yet with a half-buried wistfulness — enough mystery and provocation and allurement to unsteady his mind for a time, even if released from such proximity, such surroundings, it might ultimately recover its poise.... Her body, too — this thin, absurdly light body, beautifully proportioned, beautifully graceful ... the scent of violets, the rhythm of her dancing ... ah, impartially considered, this child of Fanny and Seldon Corry — of pretty fool and clever knave — undeniably possessed every element of fascination needed to carry an average young man off his feet, for a time. Even Martin Holme, if that evening's monopoly had been of Lena's devising, might be a little excused for finding at least a secondary pleasure in her companionship. Yet the soul — that obscure spark manifesting itself in this whiteness and darkness and grace? ... Had his confused analysis brought him a step nearer to a true and unbiassed judgment of that hidden thing? ... Not a whit.

The music stopped.

VII

LENA'S fingers slipped out of his old-fashioned clasp with the shadow of a friendly squeeze. 'I liked that very much, indeed. . . . Will you dance the next one too?'

He sat by her on the same small sofa she had shared with Martin Holme. 'Don't you do me too much honour? What's the *arrière pensée?*'

She answered quietly, turning her face away — 'You always think there is one, don't you?' — and for a moment it seemed, incredibly, that he had hurt her.

Then his prejudice, and the quick sight for human foibles which blended so oddly with his charity towards them, warned him that she was clever enough to choose her weapon for the individual opponent. And he stuck to his own guns.

'Well — isn't there, as a rule? I take you for a young woman who sets out to control destiny rather than to be controlled. You're much to be envied in being able to do that.'

'Or to think myself able,' she amended, facing him again. 'Do you think it can actually be done?'

'Ah, there you have me! Up to a point, perhaps. ... But I'm only a very muddled thinker, Lena; I hardly know what I believe. Yet I think I do believe in the efficacy of will-power to one's own ends.'

'One's *own*—? That sounds rather like the victory of evil. Or is it only the triumph of mind over matter?'

'In one sense, possibly. Though, in another sense, perhaps the triumph of mind over matter is only the triumph of not minding about the things that *don't* matter.'

'Philosophy in an epigram! ... That triumph's yours, Uncle Peter.'

'Oh, most imperfectly!' he disclaimed with a laugh, but surprised that she gave him credit for aiming at it.

She reverted seriously to her earlier phrase. 'You *don't* believe, do you, in the victory of evil? I'm sure you don't.'

'Not ultimately,' he said, looking down at her with equal gravity and feeling that in his own mind the words constituted a warning. 'Never ultimately, my dear girl, you can be sure of that. Evil can't triumph in the last resort, for all evil is a sort of death.'

He wondered, as she sat there silent with her long hands crossed on her knee, what thoughts were passing through the efficient brain behind that curving brow. Did she take any real interest in what he said, or was she merely adapting herself to him for the sake of the *arrière pensée* he had charged her with? And what, after all, could that conceivably be? What had she to gain from him?— unless her need of any kind of admiration extended even to that of an antagonistic uncle. Did she so much as realise, as she blandly pursued her own ends, that the antagonism was there? He had done his best as a rule, not to betray it. If he had been careless now and then, it was only because he had long ago assumed her indifference to his good opinion or regard. A real sensitiveness of spirit, he argued, must have been safe from him, though he might be less careful of the mere vanity that could suffer from occasional snubs. And staring down at her now, at the smooth whiteness of her neck and arms, flawless and firm as fine porcelain, he thought with a pang of regret, 'Impenetrable . . .'

The band struck up another braying fox-trot, and he realised that she had made no answer to his statement that evil is a sort of death. Had he hurt her, behind her porcelain after all? . . . He asked, with sudden gentleness, 'Are you really going to dance with me again?'

She stood up and drew his right arm about her, prettily and half-shyly, as a child might have. 'Yes, please. . . . But I'm not sure you're right, Uncle Peter — about the efficacy of will-power to one's own ends. . . . It doesn't always work, you know. Unless *every* form of self-concern is evil enough to bring its

own death.... But we're dancing — we've got to be silent now. Don't answer me.'

Obeying, he thought instead, 'Now what did she mean by all that?'

Almost unconsciously his mind again left a margin for calculation in her tacit admission of failure to achieve some secret end. But whatever her motive, she had at least not allowed him to be bored in her company.

His own calculation, his design of separating her from Holme so that he might be restored to Phœbe, had been an equally grievous failure so far. He could smile at his share in it, but not at Phœbe's. And walking home at three in the morning, having manœuvred Lena between himself and Roger, he saw Martin disappointingly strolling ahead at Dr. Briton's side, while Frank, who was to sleep at Mulberry Lodge, had Phœbe and Mrs. Celian on either arm. With pain for Phœbe and a resentment that vaguely included the whole party, Mr. Celian thought, 'That poor child's had a miserable time.'

Briton left them at the gate of his little bridge, and Martin dropped back uncertainly to Mrs. Celian's elbow. But Mulberry Lodge was reached in a moment, and with a comprehensive and unlingering good-night he went on towards his own home, in and out of the long shadows that a sinking moon still threw across the road.

If for no other member of the now silent little party that entered Mr. Celian's dining-room the evening had passed without consciousness of flaws, Mrs. Celian at least was still entirely satisfied with her entertainment. And loosening her handsome wraps as she sat by the

gas-fire, accepting a cup of cocoa from the saucepan left in readiness, she comfortably declared, 'A *very* jolly dance, my dears; everyone looking so merry and nice — the tennis club has never done better, I'm sure. And I *did* enjoy my games; I won nine-and-tenpence, and should have won more if old Colonel Grange hadn't played so oddly now and then. I'm sure I don't know how he expects his partners to do the right thing when he confuses them so! And if I minded anybody glaring at me, I should have felt quite uncomfortable sometimes at the way *he* glared. But I never do mind; life's short enough without tempers being short too, I always say. I play my cards to the best advantage, as it seems to me at the moment, and there's an end of it.... Phœbe darling, aren't you having any cocoa?'

'No, thank you, Mummie.'

'I think you ought to — it's so warming, and you're getting a little tiny bit thin. Are you tired? — are you cold — Peter, do make the child drink some.'

'*Make*, Amy? Surely you flatter me.... Phœbe, do as I bid you. Drink, girl!'

'There, you see!' said her mother, as Phœbe smilingly filled a cup. 'You never use your authority enough.... Lena dear, don't you smoke far too many cigarettes? How many does that make to-day?'

'I haven't counted,' said Lena. 'This is the last, anyhow — I'm going to bed. Good-night, everybody.'

Roger opened the door for her and followed her into the hall, shutting himself out too. 'Look here, young woman, you've treated me very shabbily to-night. What have you got to say for yourself?'

She pulled her cloak round her again, peering at him over the fur collar, her mouth hidden. 'Only good-night.'

'No, wait a moment, damn it all.... Why did you dance with Martin all the evening? You only gave me two.'

'I suppose Martin got there first. Whose fault — and misfortune — was that?'

'You let him hang on to you, though. You made it pretty clear that *I* wasn't to butt in.'

'It's a free country; and Martin's a very good dancer, you know.'

Roger said bitterly, 'He has the advantage of having two *arms*, of course...'

'Now, Roger — don't hurt yourself and blame me for it. Good-night, silly child.'

'Kiss me good-night, then,' he urged, pulling the collar away from her mouth. 'I've got two lips, anyhow.'

She smiled dimly, half-pitying, half-scornful, standing very still with her face tilted up to him. He could read in it neither definite invitation nor refusal, but chanced the latter and kissed her.

Mr. Celian came out of the dining-room as their faces drew apart. 'I haven't locked up,' he said mildly, turning to the hall door. 'Don't keep Frank talking too late, Roger. We're off to bed.'

Uncertain how much had been witnessed or inferred, Roger answered uncomfortably, 'All right, sir. Good-night.'

VIII

For Martin Holme, sitting alone in his dining-room, a review of the evening held a mixture of sensations, all of them rooted in dissatisfaction and uneasiness. His conscience was troubling him from several points of

view, and he suffered from the added inconvenience of not being able to decide how he might have ensured its being entirely at ease. Upon inspection he could only trace his difficulties a long way back to the folly of his marriage, avoidance of which would have avoided the present lamentable position. Yet he had to admit that it might also have deprived him of Phœbe Celian's acquaintance, since but for the financial advantage of living at the End House at a time of stress resulting from that marriage, he would probably have disposed of the house outright and continued to live in London. Therefore his marriage, in a circuitous sense, was not to be wholly deplored; for Phœbe's acquaintance was undoubtedly the feature of his life that he could least spare, even though the privilege of it was so miserably limited in extent.

He analysed the chain of events still further, and decided that for one aspect of his present disquiet his undivulged engagement to Lena Corry, long before he came to Soames Green, was responsible. For his avoidance of Phœbe that evening, even though it gave her the pain he now cursed himself for inflicting, was at least an honourable offence and one that might have been perfectly understood by her. But he had unfortunately complicated everything, without premeditation, by his behaviour with Lena — and *that* was quite definitely the outcome of their earlier relation. He could never have so paraded — as it must have seemed to Phœbe — his interest in any other young woman under her very nose; there being in fact no other interest to parade. Nobody but Lena could have held his attention for five minutes while Phœbe was in the room.

His interest in Lena, so far as it went, was not merely

a retrospective or purely personal one; his indulgence in her companionship, failing the one he desired, was far less because she was Lena than because she was Phœbe's cousin and lived under the same roof, and therefore possessed for him a savour of the woman from whom, for her own sake, he was keeping away. There was also the added reason that from Lena he derived the small comfort of a recovered intimacy, a partial release from social effort when he was least capable of making it, even though his vigilance on the topic of Phœbe herself could still not be relaxed.

But these advantages, minor ones as they were, he could cheerfully have spared to spare Phœbe a single one of the pangs his neglect might have cost her; and remembering the possibility — the *certainty*, unless he was an utter fool and had imagined the whole lovely and tragic situation between them — of her disappointment and pain, his own pain and remorse were deepened by realising too late that as she knew nothing of his one-time engagement she must have been further distressed and bewildered by his constant attendance on Lena. Even if she had known, he was not satisfied that her doubts would have been entirely set at rest. She could not know — without being told, which was just what his conscience had long debarred him from telling her — how utterly nothing Lena and every other woman had become and must remain for him since he had known herself.

This searching of his conscience, after the event, had only landed him in a morass of complication which in his simple and honourable response to its initial promptings he had never for a moment foreseen. Nor was that all, though it exhausted the sum of his self-reproach

on Phœbe's account. There remained the disturbing aspect of Lena's unexpectedly revived concern with him. Though it had been of use for the time being, securing him from temptation when he felt he could literally not trust himself to dance with Phœbe without breaking all his good resolutions, he could not suppose that Lena had that selfless object in view. Although he had once imagined himself to be very much in love with her, he could not — out of love — credit her with the altruism of spending her evening with him, against inclination, to save him from the temptation of being with the woman he loved now. That was too fantastic a supposition. Yet if her acquiescence in their constant partnership had not been against inclination —? Where, exactly, must Lena suppose him to be standing now in regard to her? ...

Cramped and uncomfortable in body as well as mind, he drew himself up in his chair and refilled the glass at his elbow.

He had been sitting there a long time; it was after five, and beyond the circle of light cast by a single reading-lamp, the shadowed room was slowly releasing the shapes of the uncurtained windows. These were now squares of grey instead of black, and very gradually the chairs standing near them acquired the same forlorn tone. The material comfort of his surroundings seemed appreciably lessened, and he felt cold, the small fire he had lighted on reaching home having sunk to grey ashes. He shivered, and thought desolately — '*Home —!*'

Yet he loved this house of his, of which the essential atmosphere was at once dignified and gentle, serene and mildly austere. That atmosphere had often been dis-

rupted by the human element introduced into it, by scenes which might well have tainted the air of the quiet and friendly rooms; yet they remained unspoilt for him. Their essence had somehow survived the sordid misery superimposed upon it, and the house was still, for his hungry imagination, one to be deeply, quietly happy in — a house for a bride....

Flora had come to it, not as a bride, but as a wife of four years' standing, and the symbol of past and future ceaseless anxiety and pain. When he first brought her there, his soul weighted with the contrast between the mistress he gave it and the mistress for which the house tacitly and wistfully asked, he had still retained a shred of hope for better things, still nursed for her an affection that had been very severely tried. Even now, after four more years that had witnessed her inexorable deterioration, though the hope had perished, the affection dimly lingered — changed, sad, subject to relapses into weary hate, but still a tenderness, an immense and painful compassion. He was a gentle-hearted person, generous and forgiving, and whatever other emotions Flora's failing had roused in him, he had never quite hardened, never grown callous or indifferent. But his preserved sensibility made matters worse for himself; he could not escape from his pity and his memory of her as she had seemed for him at twenty-four.

He thought that night, thinking drearily of her on the heels of his preoccupation with Phœbe and Lena, that it might have been more easy to hate Lena, if he had married her, than his poor wife. Lena's strength lent itself to extremes of emotion, and in the intimacy of marriage he must either have loved or hated her; though now, still recognising the fascination of her per-

sonality, he could be indifferent enough. Remembering her disturbing words on that evening just past, he wished with unaccustomed bitterness that he *had* given her a better chance to change her mind again — not on her own account, but because if he had gone on hoping for it a little longer the hasty folly of his marriage with Flora might have been averted. But the War had begun, Lena had long dismissed him, and his friends were rushing into marriage on every side; marriage had become just then an epidemic, of sentiment, romance, emulation, or obscure panic. He had caught the infection, magnified an attraction into a passion — and suffered from the after-effects ever since. If only, he mused miserably again, he had remembered Lena a little longer, the danger of Flora would have passed him by and he might now have been gloriously free to take what at last he most deeply and enduringly wanted.

Yet perhaps only 'might,' for he was the type of man to marry early, wanting companionship and disinclined for more movable relations. The most unsensual of men, he was the more easily inspired with real affection and a desire for its permanence; and though intellectually fairly complex, he was left by the simplicity of his emotions a little dangerously exposed to a sex of which in those days he had observed only the finer aspects. A more evil-natured man might have as readily fallen in love with either Lena or Flora, but he would less readily have reached the point of marrying one of them.

Martin had never considered that Lena had treated him badly in breaking their engagement; she had done it adroitly enough, having even at that age a considerable art in preserving an admiration in the act of dis-

carding it. That fact had escaped him; but, believing always in the essential freedom of love, hating the idea of coercion, he had merely respected the courage of her honesty, and if now, at this late hour, she meant to indulge that courage in an opposite direction, it hardly lowered her in his opinion even though it complicated his situation. In the undivertible current of his feelings toward Phœbe, the idea of Lena's revived affection left him emotionally untouched.

The feeble light beyond his window slowly strengthened; and leaving his chair at last, he went out of the room and the house to his front gate. Leaning on it, sniffing the fresh and chilly smell of the yew hedge on either hand, he looked up at the early morning sky. There was no colour in it yet, and the earth below was dusky and strange and very quiet; only the withered leaves still clinging to the tall trees across the road shivered a little on their bare boughs with a faint scraping sound. Owing to those tall trees, at no point from his house could he catch a glimpse of Mulberry Lodge, though it was only a quarter of a mile away. But he knew very well the exact tree which gave him a line straight to the house, and he stared at it sombrely now, sending his spirit across the space in between to hover at Phœbe's side. Somewhere there, beyond that thick screen of trees, beyond the gardens and roofs and solid creamy walls of Mulberry Lodge, she must be lying asleep, with her fawn-brown hair in her eyes.... Or lying awake, watching the light grow and thinking bewilderedly of him.... It seemed to him that many months had passed since he stood on the bridge and looked at her in the garden, exchanging with her for

the first time, in passionate gravity and silence, the knowledge that they had never once put into speech. Was she fearing now that she had misread his message? — or that the message was a lie? ...

A bird moved somewhere in the garden behind him, then flipped soundlessly from its bush to stand in the middle of the wet lawn, slim with alertness, an eye cocked towards the human shape by the gate. A leaf fell slowly from some high bough, tap-tapping clearly as it dropped through the thick branches to the ground; and very faint and far away, thin as an elfin chime and hardly more than a vibration on the air, he heard the Abbey clock at Challerton striking six. It ceased, the delicate vibration pulsing for another instant on the silence, and Martin went back into his house.

CHAPTER THREE

I

THE Maitland-Challerton affair, which Frank Somerdew had once mendaciously used as a warrant for abstraction, had by now swollen to dimensions of complexity and importance demanding the whole attention of the head of the firm. Mr. Celian accordingly absorbed himself in it very gratefully, turning with relief from his private worries to a matter so impersonal, so exclusively concerned with the material and unemotional problems of a lease, a breach of contract, and the question of compensation. There were no elements here of sentiment or passion, or only those passions — of anger, meanness, malice, and the like — which seem inevitably to be roused whenever one human being enters into controversy, public or private, with another.

But at least these defluxions of human nature were not Mr. Celian's personal concern; his lay only with a settlement of the dispute, which had now reached the High Court, so that his presence in London was needed day by day. In recent years he had rarely attended the Courts himself, usually sending Frank Somerdew there to acquire that knowledge of men of which the senior partner sometimes felt he himself possessed too much. But Mr. Maitland, farmer and dairyman, was fighting Landed Interest in the person of the Earl of Challerton, and Mr. Celian thought it politic to give the affair his particular attention. That the firm of solici-

tors acting for Lord Challerton happened to be one against which Messrs. Celian and Somerdew had a long-standing professional grievance undoubtedly added a spur to his interest in the case. He desired victory for his client's sake, believing him to be a genuinely injured party, but, since he had not been able to prevent the disputants getting as far as the Courts, the minor contest between his own firm and Messrs. Parrett and Larne appealed strongly to his fighting spirit, which, once aroused, was surprisingly unyielding and obstinate.

His days being thus occupied at a distance from Soames Green, and his evenings largely spent closeted in the library at Mulberry Lodge, with Frank or his client or both, he had neither time nor room in his mind for dwelling on the progress of more intimate and family affairs. But at breakfast on the Sunday following his first week in Court, he learnt that a golfing match had been arranged for that day in which Frank and Phœbe were to oppose Lena and Martin Holme, an arrangement that seemed unlikely to further his secret desires on the subject of more permanent partnerships.

His mind snatched back into the atmosphere of domestic worries, he asked rather grudgingly, 'Whose conniving is this? I didn't know Frank had had time lately to think of golf.'

Mrs. Celian supplied, indirectly, the information that no one else volunteered. 'Frank's young still, Peter, you must remember; he can't be expected to concentrate only on his work as you can. I suppose you imagine, after you've finished with him of an evening, that he goes straight off home to digest what you've told him. Well, he doesn't — he comes straight to my drawing-room and gets comforted with cakes and things that

I dare say he digests a lot more easily than all your stodgy legal stuff!'

Roger, in spite of his depression of spirit just then, glanced at his father with an amused tightening of his lips. For he knew that a dislike to finding himself unaware of any arrangement, event, or proposal to which his family was already privy, was one of the few foibles of a parent whom he regarded in his heart of hearts as a singularly perfect specimen of the breed.

He heard now, in the augmented dryness of Mr. Celian's tone, the instant response of vexation. 'Very possibly. Possibly also his digestion of the last might be aided by abstention from the first. A little lying awake at nights chewing the cud of his professional concerns would be no worse for Master Frank than snoring on unwholesome plum cake.... What time is your match?'

Phœbe said placatingly, 'Frank's calling in the car at eleven. We're having two short singles before lunch.'

'Oh,' said her father, not mollified at imagining how those singles might be composed. 'What are *your* plans, Roger? You seem to be out in the cold.'

Very conscious of the fact himself, very sore inwardly in consequence, Roger answered with creditable cheerfulness, 'Oh, well, I'm no use to golfers nowadays — except as a caddy. Do you care to walk over to the Club with me for tea? — or are you chewing the cud of Mr. Maitland yourself?'

Mrs. Celian interposed, wistfully, but with a want of tact, 'I wish *Roger* had a car, Peter, to save his walking so much. Don't you think you could let him have one soon — just a *little* one? He'd enjoy it so much now that he can't play golf.'

Mr. Celian's face flushed with one of those sharp spasms of irritation which his wife sometimes occasioned. For during the last few years he had deliberately denied his family the car he could now afford for the very reason that Roger, in his disablement, would be debarred from driving it.

Seeing that flush, touched yet irritated by the sympathy that he guessed as its source, Roger came rather gallantly to the rescue. He laughed, left his place at the table, and, embracing his mother's stout form with his surviving arm, he kissed the top of her head. 'You're a kind thing, Mater, but a goose! How can *I* drive a car? ... I don't want one — I don't want to see one about.... Do let's get back to the point. Will you walk with me to Stunridge, sir?'

'Yes, if you like.' Mr. Celian also left the table, feeling annoyed with everybody and stretching an arm for the pipe that would help to restore his temper. 'I'll chew poor Maitland this morning.'

'Oh, dear — then must I go to church alone?' complained Mrs. Celian, who had been obliged to face that necessity almost every Sunday for years.

Resembling his father in the ability to smother a personal woe under a kind action, Roger answered at once, 'I'll come with you. I've nothing else to do.'

'Dear boy, I'd love to have you — but it's not much compliment to the poor church to put it like that, is it?'

Mr. Celian knew well enough how good a compliment to the teaching of that church his son's offer implied. And affection for Roger suffused his cold eyes. 'Don't look a gift-horse in the mouth, Amy,' he said gruffly, disappearing behind the *Sunday Times*. 'Let him go

with you, and be grateful for small mercies when you hear Frank's Klaxon shattering the Sabbath calm.'

Roger heard it as he followed his mother up the aisle; and the gloom of his mood deepened, though not with envy of Frank for its possession. That sensation troubled him sometimes, but less often than formerly, the driving of a car — once his pet ambition — being now only one of the many pleasant things the War had obliged him to accept, with outward good grace, as not for him. He had a sanguine temperament, on the whole, and a vein of sound if still vague philosophy in his nature; so that although it had not been easy, for one who loved the violent use of his limbs, to realise that athletics were finished with — at twenty-one — he had been able to see that life might still contain other things, some of them very much worth while; and his natural cheerfulness and reluctance to visit his own trouble on other people had combined to make him take that trouble very well. Though it seemed to him a sheer perversity of ill-fortune that had robbed a left-handed man of his left arm. Perhaps only his father — and Lena, with her sure penetration of most disguises — understood how much he felt his loss or what an effort had been demanded to conceal his feeling from the world.

But on that Sunday morning, as, in fulfilment of his kindly impulse, he entered the Celian pew, the jubilant winding of Frank's horn brought him a pang only indirectly connected with the car itself. Envy was searing his soul, indeed, but envy of Martin Holme.

Roger knew all about Frank's spasmodic desertions of Phœbe for Lena, and had never been seriously

troubled by them. He was too sure of Lena's private opinion of Frank to fear that rivalry, though in his half-unconscious and precocious recognition of her type he suffered a little sometimes on account of Frank's good looks. Whatever her private opinion of any man might be, Roger knew instinctively that physical attraction would always weigh with her to the extent of making her not quite unresponsive to it. It was that knowledge which sometimes embittered his sanguineness; she might think Somerdew 'an intellectual vacuum' — he had heard her so describe him — but damn the fellow, he had two arms — two arms! ... What particular advantage had Roger himself — four years her junior into the bargain — to set against that blessed possession?

And now Martin Holme.... A very different proposition, much graver, more disturbing; even though, counterbalancing the same asset of a regulation pair of arms, Martin was disfigured by the encumbrance of a wife

Martin, Roger reflected, had a decent sort of face as well as Frank (Roger greatly preferred it) and Martin wasn't an intellectual vacuum. Far from it.... Martin — he thought forlornly, staring at the jet-spattered bonnet of an old lady in front of him — was just the sort of person he could understand a woman's liking very much. He was quiet and well-behaved and pleasant to look at ... and wore the right ties and hats ... and had a handicap of five, not too bad ... and he danced very well — Lena had rubbed that in, little darling devil — and he had rather a jolly voice and figure and a sense of humour ... and — 'Oh *damn!*' thought poor Roger, as — recalled by a rustle — he bent his nose decorously towards the polished ledge of his pew — 'What else is

there for a man to be to make a woman think him the devil of a fellow? ... Yet what's the good of Lena's thinking him that?—Besides, he isn't really—that's more in Frank's line.... But I suppose,' his thoughts continued miserably, 'it doesn't much matter what anybody really is when it comes to falling in love. The germ gets in and there you are....'

The germ had got into him, certainly, and there he was...not at all happy, though at moments he believed Lena felt rather kindly towards him. She chaffed him a lot, of course, in her unobvious, rather grave way, and snubbed him sometimes, but not very disagreeably—making the snub a sort of cousin to mere chaff. ... Sometimes, too, she was grave in a different fashion, more charming and more seductive... and just sometimes she let him kiss her. She was rather diabolically clever about those special 'sometimes,' he perceived ruefully; she never ran any risk of his getting tired of wanting to or tired of doing it.... But she wouldn't listen to him if he talked to her seriously about those kisses or about himself or what he felt for her; he could never commit her to anything—she reverted always to her odd form of chaff, called him 'child' and told him he didn't really know what he felt for her himself.... The extraordinary thing was that she was more or less right.

Roger always refused to admit this to her, feeling that any confessed doubt must be a very bad compliment; but a curiously mature insight into his own emotions warned him that these were not such as he had any right to put before her for her serious considering. In his comparative ignorance of women, he had yet acquired a perception of the conflicting forces of their

influence on men, and while he suffered constantly under the particular force of Lena's influence, he preserved throughout a humiliating suspicion of inadequacy somewhere, not in her, but in himself, not in the quantity, but the quality of his feelings. The doubt kept him — not only selfishly, but for her own sake — from urging her to take him with complete seriousness. For how could he urge her to take seriously — even if she could miraculously want to, and he was gloomily hopeless of the miracle — what he could not honestly persuade himself he could seriously offer? ...

Mechanically assuming again, in company with his neighbours, an attitude of mild devotion, he prayed suddenly into the open hymn-book under his nose, 'O God, let me love her properly or not love her at all....'

II

If Mr. Celian could have learnt the precise state of his son's mind, he would have been greatly relieved, and could cheerfully have told him — 'My dear lad, you're merely suffering from the propinquity of a fascination that's general instead of particular. Your sex-instinct tells you that Lena is a type many men will love, and your herd-instinct immediately sends you in pursuit. But you only care for her fascination, not for herself. That's what's the matter with *you*.'

Unfortunately, Roger revealed nothing of his secret indecisions, and his father saw only the symptoms of his more obvious malady. And as they walked together on that mid-November afternoon, across the water-meadows towards Stunridge, Mr. Celian debated whether for once he might break through his tradition of non-

interference with his children and introduce the subject of Lena. Roger was assuming an air of mild cheerfulness, but it was not very deceptive, and his father felt that the underlying mood of depression might be at once propitious and disastrous to any advance. He waited, therefore, on developments, and discussed alien topics with a competitive assumption of freedom from all care.

When two people, however, have the same matter at heart, and when one of them can to some extent read the other's mind, a protracted discussion on indifferent subjects becomes at last a rather wearying task. And inevitably, between these two, all conversation gradually wilted and died; by the time they left the long stretch of meadows for the wooded slopes leading to the golf-course, almost complete silence supervened.

Across those uplands the dropping sun was dispensing its final thin glory of November gold. The woods looked as if they were smouldering, so fiery a brown was the undergrowth, so smoke-like the mist already curling between the trunks of the trees. And here and there, at the edge of these scattered pyres, a small tree advanced shyly into the open, the tip of every branch alight with little flame-like leaves.

As the two Celians climbed the steeper slopes to the Downs, leaving the woods and hangers behind, Roger broke their long silence, pointing to one of those adventurous young trees. 'That's rather a handsome little chap.'

Mr. Celian grasped at a possible opening. 'Yes. A lesson in hope for the young despairing! All those withered leaves will be green again in a few months' time.'

'You ought to be a poet,' said Roger negligently, unconscious that he spoke something like the truth.

Equally unconscious, Mr. Celian sighed, not for a missed vocation, but for what he feared he was missing now. And suddenly resolving to hazard a definite defeat, he answered with his eyes on the ground, 'Talking of poets... how about Lena, my dear boy?'

After a moment of uneasy hesitation, Roger said, 'Do you mean — her poetry?'

'No, Roger. Or — romantically speaking — yes.... Her poetry for you... That exists, doesn't it?'

Roger's mental honesty, even in his embarrassment, suggested that poetry, in his father's sense, was not precisely involved in the sensations he was so unexpectedly being asked to discuss. He evaded the point with — 'Oh, I don't know. Lena's a funny girl...'

'Yes.... Do you kiss her often?'

Roger was immensely startled. But he at once remembered the night of the dance. That kiss, then, *had* been seen. There had certainly — alas! — been no kisses since then. He stammered, feeling very small and young, 'No, sir.'

'I think I wouldn't, if I were you,' Mr. Celian suggested mildly, applying a match to his pipe. 'You'll only upset yourself. You won't upset *her*.'

His son was unable to contradict that melancholy truth. But with an unlooked-for sensation of relief, of something easing an oppressive constriction in his chest, he expanded his lungs and murmured involuntarily, 'She's got such a damnably red mouth.'

No contradiction was possible for his father either, though the truth was a less melancholy one. Concealing a smile, he said, 'Oh, I'm not trying to belittle the

inducement.... You haven't proposed to her, by any chance —?'

'I... don't think so.'

Mr. Celian smiled openly. 'Does *she* think so?'

'I don't know.... God knows what Lena ever thinks.'

'God or the Devil —' Mr. Celian mentally added. But he too felt relieved, both by what his venture had elicited that was reassuring and the manner in which his son received his approach. Not many young men would have taken his questions so well.... There were great advantages in being friends with one's son; one was not made to feel the impertinence of one's fatherhood.

The grass felt pleasanter beneath his feet; the sun, stretching a last long finger from the west before the hills took it, touched his cheek with a sharp warmth. He pulled cheerfully at his pipe. 'Lena's thoughts are not easily guessed by any one, I fancy. God, as you say, may know them, but no one else is likely to.... I think I'd leave them unexplored, Roger, if I were you. And I think, if I may suggest it, I'd leave kisses alone too. You'll get no good by them in the long run — I'm pretty sure of that. And it all seems a shade — cheap, shall I say? — in your mother's house.... Dodging behind doors — snatching chances.... It's not good for Lena either.'

Roger's subconscious estimate of Lena acquitted his conscience of introducing her to evil ways. He knew himself to be the more basically innocent of the two. But he much disliked the charge of vulgar behaviour, though recognising its partial truth. And he muttered with his first evidence of resentment and distaste, 'It's not my fault we're in the same house.'

Mr. Celian's discomfort returned at once, in sympathy. 'Not in the least. I was thinking of æsthetics rather than ethics.' With thankfulness he realised they were now on the golf-course, and searching the expanse of it was able to add, 'Look, there's our foursome, going up the eighteenth.'

'We've timed it very well,' said Roger, reassuming his airy disguise. 'Tea'll be ready when we arrive.'

Tea in the lounge of the club-house before its big open fireplace with a piled-up log fire, was a very pleasant meal; and Mr. Celian, with his incurable taste for sub-currents, found it hard to believe, as he listened to these cheerful-tongued young people, that their intermingled emotional problems were not the creation of his own too lively imagination. Even Lena, with her creamy cheeks stung to a faint damask by the keen air, was more vivacious than usual, and appeared to be quite impartial in her response to all three young men. Roger, too, was soon restored to good spirits, though at first, abashed by his father's presence, he kept his eyes away from Lena's face.

But when at last a move was made, Mr. Celian became aware once more that flaws existed beneath the general serenity.

Somerdew stood up first, saying, 'It's getting lateish; I'd better bring the car round.'

Phœbe looked at her father with a vague appeal in her eyes. 'You and Roger aren't walking back in the dark, are you?'

'I thought of a train. We could catch the six-five.'

'Can't you squeeze us all in, Frank?'

Mr. Celian observed that upon the faces of Lena and

Martin there sat a cautious blankness of persuasion for or against, and he wondered how far their private wishes were identical.

Frank pursed his lips doubtfully. 'Six? ... It *might* be done, I suppose.'

'Don't worry,' Roger said. 'I'm quite happy to walk back — I meant to. Take the Guv'nor in.'

Mr. Celian, ordinarily the last person to let himself be included where he might in any sense be in the way, reflected suddenly that proably no one but Lena would resent his intrusion. And with conscious maliciousness he said, 'If you *could* find room, I'd be glad to drive.'

'Rather, sir!' Frank agreed heartily, secure from any expectation of his making room in the front seat. 'I can do one extra quite easily — at the back. The car'll be round in half a minute.'

He went off to the garage, Martin and the two girls for their coats, and Roger and his father were left alone in the empty lounge. Roger, standing with his back to the fire, suddenly grinned. 'Sucks for Lena!' he said. 'Well, I must be off.'

But he waited — in silence, for Mr. Celian made no reply to that small though rather illuminating gibe — till the others returned, and then watched the disposing of them in the car. His grin of mischievous satisfaction faded a little as he saw Lena place herself between her uncle and Holme; he had forgotten the compensations of 'squeezing in,' and cursed himself for his ready inclusion of Mr. Celian to his own disadvantage. The six-five train could easily have conveyed his father home, and he himself might have sat tucked away in warm darkness under the hood, with Lena's hand in his under the rug.... But what if, carelessly permitting that

favour, she duplicated it on her other side? He believed her not quite incapable of it; and Holme after all wasn't a stone, by any means, and he had a drunken wife.... 'Oh, hell!' thought Roger, as the car slid away. 'I'm glad I'm not there after all.'

Mr. Celian, however intrusive his presence might seem to Lena, did not believe that he stood in the way of physical demonstrations. His proximity, in fact, need not prevent the surreptitious hand-holding enviously predicted by Roger; but he was tolerably sure that even if her own inclination, or design, had reached that point, Martin's could not yet have got so far. He remembered enough about youth to know—though his own youth had not included very much of the kind—that allegiance to one woman does not invariably rule out merely physical attraction to another; indeed, he knew very well that misery and an absence of the wanted hand may drive a man to cling to the wrong one for spurious comfort. But Martin Holme, though divided miserably enough from Phœbe in one sense, had nothing but his own honourable abstentions to withhold him from her. He might long for her to be there in the darkness by him at this moment, but he had the comfort, without the aid of Lena's touch, of knowing that Phœbe would most gladly be with him if she could. His longing was not empty, perhaps not quite without hope, and if he suffered from any jealousy of Frank, it could only be of the other man's blessed freedom of action, freedom to make love to Phœbe if she let him. And as to that willingness, if Phœbe had been right when she said 'We both know'—he must feel very secure.

Mr. Celian forgot that knowledge of such an insub-

stantial kind, unaided by words, does not for every temperament imply perfect security, and that an imperfect security is no security at all. Being also unaware of any previous intimacy of affection between Lena and Holme, he could not fear the mistaken scruples which may assault a delicate sense of honour. But at least he was right in one surmise; for Martin nursed an unlighted pipe in the hand nearest Lena and the other was pushed into his coat-pocket. If the capacity of the car involved a persistent and troubling contact from which there was no escape, it was Mr. Celian's own doing rather than Holme's.

Lena — content, perhaps, to let that warm and gentle pressure spare her wits the trouble of exercise — hardly spoke to Martin all the way home, but talked quietly of the novels of Dostoievsky to her uncle.

III

Mr. Maitland's action against the Earl of Challerton occupied the Court for a longer time than had been anticipated, and it seemed likely that the greater part of a second week would have to be spent in labouring for his victory. Mr. Celian's initial labours were in a sense finished with, and he took a secondary place in the proceedings while King's counsel bandied their stinging little pedantic jests above his head. But though less conspicuous and imposing for the public, with his unadorned and thinning crown, than these Olympians in their wigs, he and his clerk were still of high importance to their client's fortunes, and he could not afford to let his attention wander — as now and then he would have liked to — among less present and practical affairs.

There were intervals when he was rendered intolerably drowsy by the stuffy atmosphere, and by the droning voice of counsel citing analogous cases and reading long extracts from tomes that had a habit of slipping off the desks with a crash that brought titters from the bored yet expectant occupiers of the public gallery, grateful for minor incidents to relieve the tedium of their idle attendance; but on the whole Mr. Celian enjoyed this protracted battle of wit in a field with which he had been familiar for nearly thirty years, and in addition to his sympathy for his client and his professional desire for a judgment, he nursed doggedly his animosity against the opposing solicitors, to whose rout he had contributed all the zest and ability at his command.

On the afternoon following the golf-match he began to have definite hopes of success. The Judge had more than once pulled up the defending counsel with a sharpness that Mr. Celian knew to be of good augury from that mild-tongued elderly man; the foreman of the Jury had asked a question obviously embarrassing to Lord Challerton, and the forehead of Mr. Humphrey Parrett was starred with small beads of perspiration which must have sprung from an internal heat, for the Court, though airless, was cold. Mr. Celian, perceiving that moisture, at once felt the atmosphere less disagreeable himself; and with the small thrill of impending victory pleasantly pricking his own skin, he thought suddenly, 'These things — work — ambition — impersonal interests — are better in the long run than all the moonshine perturbations of love, jealousy, passion.... Those pass away. These remain....'

Yet a moment later he rebuked himself, knowing

that this was not his true belief. Every variety of interest had its place in life, its peculiar value... and he admitted that personal values, the human side of things, had always been the most vivid interest in his own life, even though he had lived always with their shadows, the substance having been surrendered at an age when sacrifice is in itself Romance and not merely a prosaic doing-without. He wondered whether, faced ten years later with the same need for decision, he would have had enough ardour to renounce.... He thought of his children then, and apologised to them in spirit for calling them shadows. Yet he fancied he saw reproduced in them his own comparative lethargy of ambition, and hoped they might be in some way compensated, by gentler contentments, for the lack of that divine unrest. ... Compensation! That word at the moment was vitally practical, and pulling himself up with a jerk he snatched back his vagrant thoughts.

Phœbe, who went to London three days a week for lectures in botany and geology, was sitting somewhere behind him that afternoon; he had seen her come in after lunch and was to take her to tea at the Waldorf when the Court adjourned. When he joined her in the corridor, she was greeting Mr. Maitland, whom she had known since she was a child; and Mr. Celian heard her say, 'But of *course* you're going to win — everything's going splendidly.'

Red-faced and flustered, with an unfamiliar bowler in his hand and a covert-coat flung back from his hard tweeds in the emotion-engendered heat of that cold day, Mr. Maitland answered dubiously, 'I'm sure I hope you're right, Miss Phœbe, but *I* can't make head and tail of what these clever gentlemen say. They don't

seem to be talking about me at all! Here's your father now; you hear what *he* thinks.'

'No one on this earth,' said Mr. Celian, 'can foretell what a jury may not get into its head that'll defeat justice! But, apart from that margin for disaster, I think we shall be all right.'

'I *told* him so!' said Phœbe, with such innocent triumph that even Mr. Maitland, little more familiar with forensic subtleties himself, chuckled appreciatively into his tawny-grey beard.

'That's a good fellow,' said Mr. Celian, as he emerged with Phœbe into the fog-stained twilight of the Strand. 'What people call "one of the old school"; which, applied to his class, seems to mean a man who retains a perhaps misplaced respect for his "betters," and whose main object in life isn't to squeeze everyone else to his own profit. He cares for his land and his animals and his family, treats his customers with consideration and courtesy, and has a wistful yet self-respecting admiration for education and aristocracy. One of his main discomforts in all this present agitation is that he's setting up to fight a lord! — who ought to know better than to misuse him.... I'm fond of the man, Phœbe; but his is a vanishing type, I'm afraid.'

They waited on an island for the passing of a carriage and pair, which looked, amidst that welter of machine-propelled traffic, like a phantom from the moribund age in which Mr. Maitlands had abounded. Looking at those horses, at the polished rosewood of their haunches, the delicate arrogance of their lifted knees and flinging hoofs, Mr. Celian murmured, 'Beautiful action, Phœbe — beautiful and pathetic... another in-

stance of lost aristocracy and other lost types. We don't often see such things nowadays.'

Phœbe pressed his arm. 'I sometimes think the world must have been a little nicer when you were young. To the casual and prosperous eye, anyhow. Too much money or too little always seems to be in evidence now; one's always being made rather disgusted or very sad.'

'"*There hath passed away a glory from the earth* ..." Difficult to identify the glory, perhaps, but I think something's gone.... Perhaps in fifty years' time no one will miss it and our class will have found its own level again — or a new one of some kind. Just now it seems rather astray, suspended between the upper and lower freedoms, without the benefit of either.' He pushed open the swing door of the hotel. 'Ah, well, there are still tea and *éclairs* — cakes and ale.'

Two more days saw the conclusion of Mr. Maitland's case; and Roger Celian, taking a few hours' holiday from his office to be 'in at the death,' had the satisfaction of hearing judgment given in favour of his father's client.

'Even "lords," you see,' he heard Mr. Celian saying later to the flushed and elated plaintiff, 'can't have it all their own way in these enlightened times! "The law's an ass," of course, but here and there justice does creep home.'

'Your father must have his joke,' the dairyman said delightedly to Roger, wiping a streaming forehead. 'And he's welcome to it, I say; he's kindly welcome to anything I can do to repay him for his trouble. Mul-

berry Lodge'll never go short of cream, I promise you, Mr. Roger — you tell your mother that.'

He travelled with them, gratefully voluble, to Paddington, but left them there to join his friends, and they went farther down the train. But half-way along the platform Mr. Celian stopped abruptly, saying — 'This'll do — get in here.' For ahead of him he had recognised, in astonishment and misgiving, the familiar outlines of his niece and Martin Holme. He hoped Roger had not noticed them, and that at Soames Green, in the dark, they might escape a meeting. But Roger had in the same moment become aware, with sharper and more personal distress, of those intimately strolling figures on ahead; and with the instinct of youth to hover in the vicinity of its pain, he said hurriedly, 'Oh, let's go farther up — this is a third, anyhow.'

'Well —!' Mr. Celian opened the door of the nearest first-class compartment, 'Here's a smoker — I won't go a step farther, and it's nearer the other end.'

Hiding from each other the knowledge that each possessed, disturbed and angry from different points of view, they dived with unbetraying faces into a discussion of the idiosyncrasies of judges, the anomalies of Equity, and the satisfactory issue of the Maitland-Challerton case.

Mr. Celian asked finally, 'Well, Roger — do you regret your desertion of the Firm? Does jurisprudence — demonstrated — still make no appeal?'

'Not much, sir, I'm afraid. It's interesting, of course ... but I've got a sort of prejudice against earning my living by downing some other fellow.'

A little hurt, his father said drily, 'Most livings are earned by somebody's getting the better of somebody

else. And solicitors take their fees in any event.... Incidentally, this solicitor's fees have enabled you to follow your own bent.'

'Yes, I know; I'm inconsistent, of course. Still... I've lost an arm in someone else's quarrel, as it were, and I'd rather stick to a job that doesn't depend for success on — on maiming someone else.'

Mr. Celian appreciated the sentiment without ceding the point. 'There are very few of such jobs left — especially if you're going to class the Services in the other camp. And even in your own line — have publishers the name for being philanthropists?'

'Oh, the *name* —! Conversely, are all lawyers sharks?... We don't sweat our authors, anyhow, and nobody loses by our gain — the other way round, in fact.... By the way' — his face stiffened into constraint — 'did you know that Lena has just honoured us with the refusal of her poems?'

'I did *not* know.' Mr. Celian's own stiffening betrayed his instant resentment at being kept in ignorance. 'Why this secrecy?... Have you read them?'

'Not all — I haven't had time. And of course the poetry side isn't my department at present. But I thought they seemed pretty good. Lycett's dealing with them first; he'll hand them over to Mr. Cole if he thinks fit.

'I see,' said Mr. Celian flatly, wishing that this failing of his, which he could recognise, but never control, did not have the effect of lessening his enthusiasm for whatever project was involved. 'Well, I hope she may have good fortune with them.'

'No question of "fortunes,"' said Roger. 'We're certainly not philanthropists to poets. But that's the public's fault.'

The train stopped at Allbury Junction and they crossed the platform to their waiting connection without encountering Lena and Holme. But with a furtive glance over his shoulder, Roger saw them in the distance; and a fresh pang of envy and despair made his body ache, though he knew that his restless thoughts of Lena, his vague and painful feelings for her, had never definitely included such a thing as hope.

At Soames Green Station his father dived hastily for the exit, saying, 'Come round with me through the town; I've got to look in at the office for a minute.'

Roger followed gloomily, and as they drew clear of the engine saw the forms of Lena and Martin going through the gate leading down to the canal. He thought miserably of the darkness of that steep path, the emptiness and solitude of the meadows beyond... perhaps they wouldn't go straight home, but would wander there for a time, not caring or knowing that the night was cold, the grass wet.... In imagination he could feel the sweet chill of that long grass about his knees, feel the contrasted warmth of Lena's hand, of her breath on his cheek and the soft, soft heat of her mouth....

'Come in,' said Mr. Celian, unlocking his private door. 'I shan't be very long.'

But his son said, 'I think I'll get on home, sir,' and turned away without offering any excuse. Arrived at Mulberry Lodge he searched it jealously for Lena; but though her way had been a short cut she had not come home. He lighted a cigarette and lay on the bed in his cold room, sinking into the pain of his imaginings about her and Martin out there in the water-meadows in the unpeopled, misty dark.

IV

CRAFTILY, at dinner, Mr. Celian said to his daughter, 'You and Lena missed all the fun; you ought to have come to Court. What were you doing with yourselves?'

He felt a little ashamed of giving Lena a chance to expose herself as a liar before Roger, should the boy have seen what he saw, but he wished to discover definitely, if he could, how far that companionship of hers had been accidental or whether it would be discreetly ignored.

Phœbe answered first. 'I'd promised to go to Mrs. Briton. She had old ladies to tea, and I'm accused of brightening them up. Young faces, you know—! Do old ones really enjoy the contrast, I wonder?'

'A cultivated taste, no doubt. What about you, Lena?'

His niece suffered from the disadvantage of not knowing she had been seen. 'I was in Town.'

'Oh. Dressmakers, I suppose.'

'Partly. And an engagement.' She paused, scented a trap, and added conversationally, 'I came down with Martin Holme.'

Mr. Celian thought rapidly, 'Stalemate, the little wretch — it tells me nothing. I was a fool to ask.'

'How was Martin?' he asked. 'I haven't been up by his train this week.'

'Dear Flora will be back in about ten days.'

'Oh, Lena, you didn't ask him about his poor wife?' Mrs. Celian reproachfully enquired.

'He told me, Aunt Amy.... I think'—said Lena, adjusting a candle-shade —'I think he finds it a relief to talk about her a little. He must feel horribly lonely sometimes.'

Phœbe hoped desperately that the glow of resentment and jealousy in her breast would not spread to her face. Lena glanced at her. 'Doesn't he discuss Flora with you?'

'Only indirectly.'

Inwardly commending the subtlety of that quiet reply, Mr. Celian said disapprovingly, 'I'm surprised to hear he discusses her with anybody. He's always seemed admirably loyal.'

'Oh, he's very loyal,' Lena heartily agreed, leaving her audience with the impression that confidence in herself was a perfectly legitimate outlet.

Roger changed the subject very simply by complaining of neuralgia, which, engaging his mother's entire interest and concern, submerged the problem of loyalty and Martin Holme. His ruse, however, was founded on painful fact, for pain raged in his temples, and he was glad to obey orders and stretch himself on the drawing-room sofa, aspirin within him and cushions under his head. 'That nasty stuffy Court—' murmured his mother, laying plump cool fingers soothingly against the ache. 'I wish you hadn't gone there, my pet.'

Roger answered, with a soft groan of two kinds of anguish, 'So do I...'

Mr. Celian remained in the dining-room with his port and a cigar; and the effects of these, added to his considerable satisfaction in the events of the day, combined very soon to restore a serenity of temper which had only in the last few months become worried into uncertainty.

His mind lingered pleasurably over the details of his just-concluded case; the amounts of damages and costs; the final friendly exchange between himself and

the plaintiff's counsel, who was a very prominent man; the delight of Maitland and his almost overwhelming gratitude... but that memory brought the memory of Roger, and his thoughts grew less contenting again. Confound Martin Holme! He liked him very much, but whatever he was about just now he was giving Mulberry Lodge a lot of uneasiness in one direction and another. ... Why the devil need he discuss his poor Flora with Lena Corry? Let him talk — if he must, for comfort — to Phœbe and no one else. Yet Mr. Celian had to admit, in fairness, that if Phœbe had been right in her assumptions (and a small doubt had at last crept in), such discussion would make it doubly hard for Martin to preserve his honourable silence on the subject of love. Did that love exist, or had it ever existed, more than lightly or from sheer loneliness? Or had it weakly gone down and perished before the force of Lena's predatory instincts? ... He hated the necessity for all this feeble surmise. Subtleties of psychology were admittedly to his taste — no doubt he wasted far too much time over them — but he liked to be able to trace their workings, not to be left baffled and defeated, humiliatingly in the dark.

He remembered then a minor grievance against Lena, another leaving in the dark. And hearing a step in the hall, he called — 'Hullo! Is anybody there?'

Lena came in, a long amber cigarette-holder tilted from the corner of her mouth. 'Who do you want, Uncle Peter?'

'Oh — you'll do! My coffee hasn't come.'

'Aunt Amy's drowned in Roger's headache. I'll get it.'

'Thank you,' he said, with the absurd thought, 'She'd put poison in it if it suited her!'

'Stay and talk to me,' he said amiably, when she returned with the coffee that was always brought to him at this hour, like a rite, by his wife. 'How's Roger's head?'

'It seems bad.' She took a fresh cigarette from the open box on the table. 'Do you really want me to stay?'

'If you will.... What's this I hear about your poems?'

'What, indeed!' She spoke with the grave raillery that always just missed impertinence. 'You must tell me.'

'I understand they've gone — a volume of them — to Sirkett and Cole.'

'Then you've heard the truth!' she agreed on a note of glad surprise.

Mr. Celian's lips, with their perpetual faintly sneering and sensual curve, broadened to a smile. 'Now, Lena! ... Let me have more truth, then. You've been very discreet and secret about your intentions. Couldn't you have told us more about them?'

'I did tell Phœbe. And I think I told Aunt Amy — I forget.'

'You might have brought your poems to *me*, mightn't you, for advice, if you wanted any.'

'I took them to Roger. He's in the firm.'

'I can't contradict that. But I do suggest that in spite of his eminence I know more about poetry than he does.'

'I can't contradict that either.' She looked at him with a suddenly deepened profundity in her habitually dark and grave gaze. 'Would you really have cared for me to bring them to you, Uncle Peter?'

Unwittingly his answer changed the form of her question. 'Of course I should have liked to see them.'

She murmured — 'Oh . . . to see them. . . .'

He felt obscurely yet not quite justifiably rebuked, perceiving that there was a distinction between caring to read her poems and caring that she should have brought them to him to be read. Then it occurred to him that, just as he resented being kept in the dark, her vanity might resent a suspected lack in him of special interest in her concerns. Even from an uncle, perhaps, she exacted homage.

Well, this uncle, though not meaning to be observably unkind, had no intention of being wheedled by sex-influence into a spurious softness for a young woman who, deliberately or not, was inimical to his daughter's peace of mind.

He finished his port and refilled the glass. 'Do you care for some of this stuff? No? — you're wise. . . . Well, Lena, I wish you success with Sirkett and Cole.' Now that his first absurd vexation had passed, he could wish it sincerely. 'We shall all see your poems then.'

As if she knew that he had said all he wanted to say, she got up at once, dropping a little cylinder of cigarette-ash on the cloth. 'I don't much expect they'll publish them. . . . Good-night — I dare say you're going to be busy all the evening again. I'm very glad you won your case.'

'Thank you, my dear Lena.' He took the phrase as a conventional response to his hopes for her own success.

In the sorrowness of her heart Phœbe had taken her geological textbooks and papers to a corner of the drawing-room, where, under a lemon-shaded reading-lamp,

she tried to interest herself in the respective differences between rhyolites and andesites and granite. But, confronted by the problem of rock formations, she wondered with a dreary little smile how long it would take to fossilise her heart, this living, throbbing thing, so that it could no longer ache for Martin Holme. That heart, until this year very contentedly her own possession, was of the unsusceptible and constant kind; but her good sense and aversion from sentimentality secured her, even in her present puzzled and unhappy state, from too despairing a vision of permanent misery. Beneath her cloak of modernity, which covered an unchanging woman's soul, Phœbe was not so much either modern or old-fashioned as steeped in the womanhood of all times. Under her slang, her mild swearing and frankness of speech, her freedom from prudishness and her up-to-date outlook on life, she possessed the dignity and fastidiousness of mind, the sense of chivalry and right conduct, which may lend their grace to any age.

So, in this period of uncertainty, her attitude was quietly uncompetitive and passive. If — oh, but most inconceivably! — her own emotion had led her astray and made too much of the divined relation between Martin and herself, there was nothing to be done but control the emotion and readjust her mind. And if the relation had existed and faded, whether through Lena's agency or the mere instability of Martin's feeling, there was equally nothing for her to do — though either of these explanations must make things a little harder for her, since they would involve the subdual of a sense of injury against Lena and leave her fine conception of Martin always a little blurred. 'Though really,' she

thought humbly, 'it isn't fair to think less of him for thinking less of me. If some other man suddenly seemed to me a better person than Martin, I suppose I might admire him more. A change of heart isn't necessarily to be condemned. And perhaps Lena . . . Lena's very different from me — she may be better able to give him the comfort he needs.'

This last consideration, however, far from bringing to her mind the pleasure that was forlornly intended, suddenly overwhelmed her with other and more natural sensations, and gathering up her books she went with compressed lips to her own room.

Roger came to her there later on, in a dressing-gown and with his smooth fair hair ruffled above a very flushed and heavy-eyed face.

His sister, curled on the floor by her gas-fire, tried to look as if she had just laid down a book. 'I thought you'd been put to bed, my dear. Surely I heard Mother tucking you in?'

'I've come untucked.' He leant an arm on the mantelpiece and his head on his hand. 'I can't go to sleep at this unearthly hour, even if my confounded head would let me.'

'Is it no better?' She tried to sound sympathetic, but her voice dragged rather emptily from a brief indulgence in her own pains.

'Not much, thanks. . . . Phœbe — what the devil are Lena and Martin playing at?'

'Playing —?'

'Haven't you seen? They never used to exchange two words, and now they're inseparable.'

'Oh, come!' she protested feebly, twisting the tassel of his dressing-gown round her fingers. 'How can they

be inseparable? Martin's in Town all day, and Lena's generally with us in the evenings.'

'She can be in Town, too, when she likes. She was there to-day. I saw them at Paddington together, and I don't believe they'd only just met by accident, as she implied. I bet they'd been off to tea somewhere.... She said at dinner she'd had an engagement, but she didn't say who *with*.'

'Lena's got friends we don't know,' Phœbe reminded him reasonably, hoping to reassure herself. 'You're only guessing all that.... And in any case — it isn't exactly our affair....'

Roger found no more comfort than she did in that too obvious truth. He took refuge in an assumption of offended taste. 'She's one of the family, to all intents and purposes, and Martin's not playing the game.'

'Perhaps' — Phœbe drearily jested — 'Lena's only playing a game herself.'

'If so, it's a rotten game to play. She might think of that wretched Flora.'

'She probably thinks more of the wretched Martin. She may be fond of him, sorry for him...'

'She could have been sorry for him long ago; and I don't believe,' — Roger added in profound depression — 'she's ever fond of anybody, except herself.'

Phœbe remained silent, still twisting the Jaeger tassel.

She heard a heavy sigh, hurriedly turned into a cough, and then a moan of pain as the pulse in his temples throbbed. And she thought, 'He's in love with Lena himself, poor boy. *That's* no use, though.' Nothing, it seemed, was very much use just then....

'Do go back to bed, Roger,' she suggested. 'You look awfully out of sorts. What's the good of bother-

ing your poor head about this now? We can't do anything, even if you're right.'

'That's the hellish part.... Good Lord, I'm singeing — why didn't you tell me?' He backed away from the fire, examining his faintly scorched gown.

'I didn't notice — but I smell it now. Go on to bed, Roger — and don't get excited about things. They all' — said Phœbe resolutely — 'straighten themselves out somehow in time.'

Roger touched her cheek with his hot fingers. 'Do they? Good-night, then, old wisacre. Does nothing ever disturb *your* colossal calm?'

Phœbe broke into genuine laughter, being one of the lucky few whose sense of humour is most alert in times of adversity. '*Nothing!*' she assured him, holding up her face for his kiss. "Good-night, my dear.'

V

Mr. Alfred Somerdew, tired of his son-in-law's shoot, or perhaps having exhausted his welcome there, returned to Wintlebourne that day from the North; and he drove over to Soames Green later in the week, partly to call on Mr. Celian and partly to display the shining beauties of his recent purchase, a two-seater Sunbeam car.

He jested rather roguishly, while Mr. Celian duly admired, on the fact of his car's having less passenger accommodation than Frank's Rover. 'The youngsters go in for quantity, you see,' he explained, 'but quality's the thing at our age, eh, Peter? Little and good — metaphorically speaking, mark you — that's the motto for a connoisseur — and who's a connoisseur on Frank's side of forty-five?'

Mr. Celian admitted that maturity sometimes acquired the solace of a more epicurean taste.

'I believe you,' Mr. Somerdew genially returned, dropping a faintly red-rimmed eyelid. '"Solace" is undoubtedly the *mot joost*. Well, I must be getting on to Mulberry Lodge — I hope I shall find your good lady at home, and those charming girls.... How's my scamp Frank getting along with you here?'

Mr. Celian replied that Frank was getting along very well. 'I've no fault to find, Alfred; I hope he's equally lenient to me.'

'If not, he lets concealment feed on his damned cheek, what? I've heard no complaints.' Mr. Somerdew, giving a rakish tilt to his Homburg hat — which was adorned with the tiny feather of some game-bird — seated himself at the wheel of his Sunbeam and pulled levers and pushed switches till a deep humming rose upon the air. 'So long, Pete — in case you're not back before I tear myself away.'

The car leapt like a startled steed, emitted a warning sound like a deep-throated cry of 'Spee-eech,' and then slid soundlessly down the incline of the High Street towards the bridge.

Mr. Celian turned back to find Frank hovering inside the doorway, grinning discreetly. 'The old man's got a nerve!' he remarked. 'Careering about alone in a car at his age. He was sixty last June.... But that's a bonny bus.'

Mr. Celian reflected that he himself was fifty-three and yet did not expect soon to be in his dotage, as Frank's tone implied. He went into his own room, and from its window saw the shining tail of the Sunbeam dip across the bridge.

'Amy'll be charmed,' he thought. 'She actually likes the man.'

Amy's husband had never liked him, and often wondered how he came to be a son of the gentle and simple-mannered old Henry Somerdew whom Peter, as a young man, had known and admired.

Alfred Somerdew, at sixty, was tall and thin, with a figure aided in its preserved youthfulness by clothes of the latest cut and all the unobtrusive significances of the modern dandy. He had a high nose and a very close-clipped grey moustache which had the effect of leaving almost indecently exposed a dry and narrow mouth; his eyes, their greenish-brown tint already circled with a telltale film, had rolling lids under projecting brows, and he had kept his hair, which was smartly though a little meagrely plastered, in a backward sweep from a satanic peak in his low forehead. Mr. Somerdew's eyes underwent a change in the presence of women, becoming at once brighter and roguishly suffused. He had been a widower for twenty years, often hovering luxuriously on the brink of re-marriage without ever taking the plunge which would lay mild fetters upon his confirmed and advertised gallantry. In his professional capacity there had been no such sentimental quality, for in business matters he was astute and hard as stone, though, in partnership with the Celians, this substance in him had paradoxically broken itself against their gentler methods in vain. His son was secretly a little ashamed of him, more on account of his manners than his morals, which Frank suspected of being less desperate than was implied. But as he was also, unexplainably, a little afraid of him in spite of his shame, he kept his opinion well disguised.

Mr. Celian had been devoutly thankful when his uncongenial colleague retired from the firm to enjoy a late windfall at his leisure. During those five years of freedom from his presence, the office had been a much pleasanter place for Peter Celian than at any time since his own father's death ten years before. Frank Somerdew, though not of a type to appeal to his affection, was at least innocuous to his nerves and was his junior by twenty years, a circumstance dimly compensating to the man who was now senior partner for the first time.

In spite, however, of his lack of liking for the caller at Mulberry Lodge that afternoon, Mr. Celian returned there earlier than usual in the hope of seeing him again before he left. Now that he was released from daily contact, his aversion was tempered by the amusement he could derive from a detached observation of qualities that had grated horribly at close quarters.

Roger's headache had been the forerunner of a feverish chill which had kept him at home that day, and he was on a sofa by the drawing-room fire, with Lena comfortingly at his elbow, when Mr. Somerdew was announced. On hearing that name he breathed in dismay — 'Oh, my God!' — and tried to rise.

Mr. Somerdew affectionately pressed him back onto his cushions; and sitting blithely on his feet enjoyed himself very much with Lena, to Roger's furious disgust, till Phœbe and her mother joined them. He was still there when Mr. Celian returned, still buoyantly holding the reins of conversation and rolling his filmy eyes at the two girls.

Mr. Celian heard that Lena was to be driven out in the Sunbeam the next day, while Phœbe's treat was to follow soon. 'Can't manage two, you know, Peter,' he

explained, while Mr. Celian sensed an invisibly dropped lid. 'There's a capital dicky, of course, but I don't ask my young friends to sit in the dicky! One at a time for me — so I tossed for it and this young lady won.'

The young lady's uncle wondered whether she might not rather consider she had lost — or had she room for appreciation of even Alfred Somerdew's rheumily amorous glances? He hoped not; there was something elusive and delicate in her charm, however impotent for himself, which he should dislike to witness in operation upon Alfred.

'Lena said, 'I'm to be allowed — in great secrecy and far from the police — to steer the Sunbeam a little way.'

'She's got the hands for it,' Mr. Somerdew assured his host, looking at them dewily. 'And I'll be bound she's got the nerve too.'

'Oh, my nerve's all right,' Lena replied tranquilly, smiling up at him.

He regretfully shifted his pleased gaze to the clock, and then rose to his spat-completed feet. 'All good things end,' he sighed, 'as all good things should — to keep their savour, eh, Roger? So I must be getting home.'

Roger ignored that man-to-man hint, and murmuring — 'I'll come and look at the Sunbeam' — raised himself dizzily from the sofa.

Mr. Somerdew laid thin, hard hands upon his chest and again pressed him downwards. 'You stay there, my boy — no coming out in the cold in that condition. If you're better to-morrow, you shall have a glimpse of the Sunbeam then — see its union with this moonbeam here — eh? Isn't that apt? — Isn't Miss Lena like a moonbeam, Peter?' He squeezed the moonbeam's

hand in good-bye and found it appropriately cool and soft.

Mr. Celian said, 'Very apt, Alfred.... I'll see you to your chariot.'

As the door closed, Roger moaned, 'Dear Lord, what a noxious thing!'

'Darling!' protested his mother. 'How can you say so? He's such a *kind* man and always so gay and full of spirits. So young for his age, too, and quite a handsome face.'

'He's like an old bird, Mater! An ageing bird in terror of moulting — clinging to his sex-seductive plumage as long as he can. He nauseates me.' Roger turned to his cousin. 'Doesn't he nauseate you? Can you really stand going out in his blasted Sunbeam?'

'He amuses me,' Lena answered disappointingly. 'And Sunbeams are beautiful cars.... I think I agree with Aunt Amy — I think he's rather a nice man.'

'Don't tease poor Roger, dear,' said Mrs. Celian inconsistently, seeing the hurt disgust and wrath in Roger's face. 'He's not feeling well enough.... We'll all hate the poor old thing, darling, if it'll do you any good.'

'I can't subscribe to that,' Lena observed, going to the door. 'I don't hate him at all — he's rather a dear.' The door closed.

Roger turned his face to the cushions, finding no comfort in his mother's 'Don't attend to her, dear boy — she's only being naughty.'

But Phœbe cheered him a little by saying, 'He may be young for his age, but he reminds me all the same of Gautier's "Don Juan grown old."... He's not at all like Frank.'

Roger muttered, 'Frank may thank God on his knees for that.'

'I rather fancy he does,' Phœbe drily replied.

Lena was duly taken for her drive the next day, and professed to have enjoyed it very much.

It was only the first of rather frequent outings, for though Phœbe was not denied her promised treat and was vaguely assured of another, the invitation never took definite shape, while it was soon particularised for her cousin. Phœbe was not hurt at being passed over; she found Alfred Somerdew's society oppressive and rather offensive and was happier with his son. She had also a secret hope that, however lightly Lena must surely regard these new attentions, they would a little deflect her own, for the time being, and induce her to let Martin alone. That was all Phœbe asked. With Martin let alone, though she could pity his loneliness, she believed that the disturbed atmosphere between herself and him would be re-established very soon; he would become conscious again of all the peaceful and happy companionship that might be his if there were no obstacle in between.

She could contemplate the familiar obstacle of Flora's existence with much less distress than was occasioned by the novel and alarming threat of Lena's obstruction. Flora's possession of her husband was fortified by his pity and withered affection for her, but Phœbe had no resentment towards these additional claims. Sharing the pity and comprehending the affection, she could not believe that either really added to her own physical separation from him. And she would not have had him less loyal and kind. But the intervention of Lena was

a very different thing; Lena had no claims that must be reasonably remembered and allowed for, no prior rights that could not be gainsaid. In proportion, therefore, as Martin gave to Lena, he took something definitely from herself. And that deprivation would be harder for Phœbe to bear than if, through the devoting of all his care and attention to his wife, she should never see him again.

But, although the fact of Alfred Somerdew's open admiration for Lena might be welcomed by Phœbe, others of her family were less complacent. Mrs. Celian's more innocent and unreflecting pleasure in seeing any of her household apparently pleased was by no means shared by her husband and son. Mr. Celian's fastidiousness was considerably offended by the proximity of that ageing bird, in its desperately preserved plumage, to the youth and — at least external — fastidiousness of his niece. Lena was twenty-eight and Alfred sixty years old; his only seemly attitude towards her, Mr. Celian considered, would have been a fatherly one. Yet this was the least easy to attribute to him, no one being farther from fatherliness, in relation to handsome young women, than Mr. Somerdew. He neither felt fatherly nor at all wished to appear so.

The contingency of any serious outcome of this gay and persistent hovering was barely considered by Peter Celian, less because he could not suppose Alfred seriously attracted than because he assumed anything but a passive or amused tolerance of his admiration to be impossible for such a woman as Lena, whom he credited with the capacity for genuine passion of a certain kind. Yet even that passive or amused attitude was repellent to her uncle, who could almost have preferred, other

considerations ignored, to see her concentrate on Martin Holme. That attraction was at least normal and comprehensible and might be an uncalculating one; but he hated to think of Alfred's bony old hands — red and wrinkled and highly manicured — seeking chances to touch hers, and his sidelong glances trying to inflame her eyes to amorous response. He pictured also the disgusted wrath and pain that his son must be enduring if he were still forlornly fluttering about the same flame. To Roger's youth the thought of old Somerdew's priviledged circlings must be even more dismaying.

To minimise that pain he said to him one day, with misleading casualness, 'I'm amused at our old friend Alfred. He seems to be temporarily setting his rakish Homburg at Lena. I could almost pity him for the shock his self-esteem would receive if he knew how she must regard him.'

'She gives his cursed self-esteem plenty of excuse for remaining very comfortable.'

'Isn't that Lena's way? She can't resist the exercise of her own power. And I fancy she'd always give most in appearance where she withheld most in fact. She doesn't ventilate her true sensations very much, we know.'

'There's no making her out,' Roger growled.

His father longed to urge him once more not to try. But he said only, 'In this instance we needn't rack our brains, I should say!'

Roger said darkly, 'Don't be too sure.'

'Oh, come, my dear boy! You don't accuse her of a sentimental attachment?'

'For Mr. Alfred? Possibly not.'

'"Possibly not"! ... Her obscurity's infected you.

You *don't* suspect her, do you, of any gentler sentiment towards him than a mischievously tolerant amusement?'

'Gentler? No — Lena's sentiments don't go in for being very gentle.'

Amused and relieved to find that Roger's own sentiment for her — if it survived — was not of the kind to blunt his intelligence, Mr. Celian asked smilingly, 'Then do you suspect machinations — undue influence — in the direction of his will? She'll find the power of influence, even hers, has its limits when it approaches Alfred's purse. He's generous enough to his own pleasure, but he won't be an open-handed corpse! ... I say this in confidence, you understand; I mustn't slander my late esteemed colleague.'

His smile met with no response. Roger answered in deepened gloom, 'Influence needn't be very undue for some purposes.'

Mr. Celian found that hint too obscure for him without elaboration, and while he hesitated to ask for it Lena came into the room, wrapped in a big coat and drawing on fur gloves. 'Another driving lesson?' he mildly enquired.

'Yes. Frank's taking me out to try the Rover.' She looked at them placidly while she fastened her collar, perhaps wickedly conscious that her answer foiled expectation, and went away again.

'You see —!' said Roger in acid triumph. 'There's never any knowing what she's at.'

Those words seemed to range him with his father in an unflattering view of her ingenuousness.

VI

MARTIN HOLME, owing to his daily absence in London, was not in a position to observe the manœuvres of Mr. Somerdew, but he heard something of them from Lena herself, and something rather more illuminating from his sister-in-law, Maggie Fielding, who opened the subject at dinner one night. Flora was still absent, having contracted a bad cold, and Maggie sat in her place at the foot of the polished table under the yellow-shaded lamp.

Lifting her pretty, vacant eyes from her plate, she announced, 'I saw Miss Corry in a lovely car to-day.'

'Did you, Maggie? Did she see you?'

'Yes. She smiled at me.'

Less from curiosity about Lena's movements than from a kindly effort to take an interest in poor Maggie's insignificant doings, Martin asked, 'Where did you meet her?'

'On the Challerton road — a long, long way away. Bates and I walked ever so far. I picked the grasses in those jars.'

In a corner he saw the forlornly drooping blades that Bates, her patiently kind attendant, had placed there to give value to the girl's aimless gathering.

'There aren't many flowers to pick just now, are there? ... Who was Miss Corry with?'

'That funny old gentleman with the crooked hat and the spats — the father of the one who goes to Mulberry Lodge so much.'

'Mr. Alfred Somerdew.'

'Yes. I never remember that name; it's such a funny one.... Why does he wear his hat crooked, Martin?'

'To look smart, Maggie.'

'Oh. Is it smart?'

'Not very. But he thinks it is.... Was Miss Corry driving the car herself?'

'I think so. They were going quite slowly and she was sitting in front of the wheel, holding it with her hands — *so* — but Mr. Somerdew was holding it too. I wondered why. She had on such a pretty hat.'

'Oh,' said Martin. 'And then she saw you and smiled.'

'Yes. But we couldn't go as fast as they did, and I stopped to pick some more grasses and Bates had a stone in her shoe and had to sit on a milestone to take it out. So Miss Corry didn't speak to us.'

'I see,' Martin murmured, wishing that Bates were here now to assist him in this rather laborious conversational effort. He remembered with a sinking heart that Flora would soon be there to relieve their *tête-à-tête*. All peace of mind would be gone for him then — what little he had left....

'The old man was looking at her like *this* —' said Maggie suddenly, twisting her pretty little blank face towards him and rolling her eyes with such an unexpectedly good imitation of an amorous leer that Martin laughed aloud. But soon afterwards, as he thought of that high-nosed face peering close to Lena's and of the hands pressing hers on the steering-wheel, amusement faded, submerged in resentful distaste. That was the sort of thing that went on, was it, on these outings of hers? Not mere altruism on Mr. Alfred's part, this teaching her to drive....

Human beings, however well disposed, are still at the mercy of the simpler human failings; and though it was no longer Lena but Phœbe that Martin loved, his

renewed association with Lena's personality had enough influence to make him resent a suggestion of her intimacy with old Somerdew. What did she want to fool about with *him* for? He wasn't at all the sort of old fellow a girl might reasonably be friends with and nothing more. Alfred Somerdew's conception of friendship with young women was quite obviously — though Martin did not know him well — not at all of a platonic nature. And Maggie said he'd looked at Lena like *that.* ... Offensive old beast — how could she let him?' 'What fools women are about men,' thought Martin, sublimely disregarding analogous flaws in the sagacity of his own sex. 'Even the intelligent ones never seem able to judge the type. Any man who knew anything at *all* would see at a glance the sort of lubricious old ass Mr. Somerdew is.'

The more he thought about it the less he liked it, and the less he liked it the more uneasy he became about the confused state of his mind. What did it matter to him what Lena did or whom she chose to go about with? And what had happened lately to the beautiful understanding he had at one time felt so assured of between himself and Phœbe Celian? There seemed no signs of it now. He seldom saw her, and at the Dance Club evenings to which he sometimes went she was always absorbed by, if not in, other men, and he was thrown, half-involuntarily, on the companionship of Lena again. Lena amused and was kind to him, and it was nice of her to take him under her wing, but it wasn't what he really wanted — and he dimly felt the wing to be a dangerous one, not to himself, but to his peace of mind. He suspected it of having somehow helped to dissipate that treasured atmosphere of understanding — though surely

Phœbe must know well enough he hadn't changed? ... Yet could she definitely know? — and hadn't he in a sense changed just a little, in that, apart from Flora, his mind was not now exclusively occupied with her, but trespassed upon by Lena's influence? It was impossible to ignore Lena — not to think of her at all; her personality was too strong to have no effect, and even while he felt a sort of gratitude toward her, he was conscious also of apprehension, an uncertainty and uneasiness difficult to define.... Lena couldn't, surely, seriously mean to show him that her old brief affection had revived or never wholly died? ... That would put him in a very uncomfortable position all round, for though he shrank from hurting her in any way, his own affection — on those lines — had perished altogether and could never exist again while Phœbe was in the world....

He began uncomfortably to recognise the deplorable effects upon human action that may spring from the most laudable causes, and ruefully perceived that the excellence of a motive is by no means a guarantee against unwise and debatable conduct. For in virtuously preserving Phœbe from the danger of his illicit love-making, he had exposed her to the pain of suspecting that Lena had become a superior attraction. There was a limit, for which he had perhaps not enough allowed, to the completeness attainable in an understanding achieved entirely without speech; a margin for doubt must inevitably remain, and to that margin his behaviour with Lena at the Lawn Tennis Club Dance might have disturbingly drawn attention.

Martin suffered from the comparative weakness which is the defect of many sweet natures; and at that dance he had accepted the easiest method of protecting him-

self from the wrong thing he wished to do, instead of relying solely on his own will not to do it. He had wanted to be with Phœbe all the evening and to tell her how much he loved her and to hear that she loved him. And because Lena had unexpectedly made it not only possible but a little comforting to monopolise her, he had drifted into that means of security, knowing that his inclination might have been too strong for his will without extraneous support. He had not stopped to consider that Phœbe might not be able to guess all this; and it was impossible to explain without letting her other guesses become an established certainty, which he had all along doggedly set himself not to do. From that again excellent but perhaps disastrous motive he had refrained that same night from giving her even one glance of definite assurance.... He had undoubtedly been a most inconsiderate fool... he ought to have gone away from the dance altogether rather than risk being so misread and hurting her so much. Yet to be in Phœbe's neighbourhood was a pleasure he had been too selfish to surrender, even though he desired nothing but her good....

Since that night the whole affair seemed to have eluded his personal control; if he saw little of Phœbe and a good deal of Lena, it was now hardly his doing — certainly not his choice. He hardly knew whose doing it was — Phœbe's, Lena's, his own — or the result of mere chance. He couldn't really blame himself for having, in the first instance, behaved stupidly and tactlessly instead of wrongly, and he couldn't definitely blame either Phœbe or Lena for the attitude they seemed imperceptibly to have adopted towards him. If Phœbe had been hurt by his unexplained neglect, even that was better than hurting her in the opposite direction; and if

Lena had really decided to be kind to him again — capriciously and briefly — that was really more her fault than his. He had avoided her while she wished to be avoided, and he would be very careful to guard against her supposing that he minded whether he was taken up or dropped.

He must certainly be most careful not to give her any hint of his feeling for Phœbe. Phœbe must be kept out of every dubious situation, untarnished, unsuspected and unharmed.... If only he could be sure that she was not too much hurt already, in her poor puzzled mind. That was what chiefly troubled him. And very soon Flora would be home again, to add immeasurably to his anxieties and lack of peace....

She returned a few days later, recovered from her cold, looking very well, and in good spirits. With that capacity for self-deception which makes a lie very nearly truth, since — for the liar — it has acquired an aspect of truth, she once more set about trying to persuade her acquaintances in Soames Green that anything they might have heard to her detriment was an idle falsification of facts, and that her absence had as usual been caused by the recurrent ill-health which gave rise to such rumours.

Unfortunately, this attempt at deception had been practised too often on her neighbours for it to find much credence among them, and, though they heard it all with nods and smiles of agreement, the smiles broadened when her back was turned, and they were less deceived than poor Flora herself. She was obstinately determined to regard her own complaint as a peculiar form of 'nerves' which rendered her liable,

upon taking the smallest amount of necessary stimulant, to outbursts for which she was by no means responsible, just as her sister must not be held responsible for her shortcomings. It was a convenient theory, in that it wiped out less convenient sensations of embarrassment at meeting her friends; and, though nobody believed in it, those friends also benefited by having their own discomfort amusingly lessened.

But upon Martin, who was aware of her method, it jarred unspeakably. Very honest himself, both with the world and in his own mind, he loathed this deliberate tampering with facts, and could have preferred that Flora — if she must talk of herself at all — should present Soames Green with the exact truth once for all, and then leave the subject alone. No one, he reflected with a sour twist of his mouth, would be at all surprised by the revelation, and a few might respect her for her honesty.

He never, in those days, discussed her failing with her, with or without disguise, except when circumstances painfully compelled him; and however assiduously she might air her pathetic theories when he was not present, she stifled them when he was. In the past her self-deception had often shivered in the draught of his refusal to drape the truth, and while she now avoided direct reference to the weakness which had ruined their mutual happiness, she equally avoided any allusion that he could seize upon as an attempt to deceive herself or him.

He had said once, with a face of stony disdain, 'For God's sake, Flora, don't let's descend to humbug. *I* know and *you* know what's the matter with you, and I'm damned if I'm going to pretend anything different....

Do let us at least' — he added drearily — 'keep the decency of bare truth about us. It's warmer than a cloak of lies.'

She had given him such a suddenly stricken glance before she went silently from the room that he felt an unbearable sickness of remorse. Could this silly, puny, ignoble paltering with the truth be her only shield against the withering shame and despair that must lie — far beneath all disguise — at the bottom of her poor soul? ... Well, she must find, so far as he was concerned, some other form of support. He wouldn't, even to help her, subscribe to any cowardly blurring of facts. That would simply add to the facts' offence.

Flora only once again made any bid for his co-operation in deceit, and he had hardened his heart afresh; no amount of pity or remorse should prevail against this last poor decency of truth, even if he could not prevail upon her, in his absence, to preserve it herself. And taking her by the arm, unconsciously shaking it, he had said, 'I won't *have* it, Flora. You're not to try this ghastly nonsense with me. Once for all ... Do you understand?'

Into her pretty face there came again that dumb look of utter defencelessness. Her eyes lifted to his with the reproach of a shot bird.

He let her go and turned away.

VII

VERY soon after Flora's reappearance, Cicely Briton also returned to Soames Green. She and her brother dined at Mulberry Lodge the following evening, and Cicely presently demanded a fuller report of the town's

affairs than she had been able to extract from her erratic-tongued mother or the busy and inattentive Christopher.

'Mother talks for hours and tells me nothing at all,' she complained cheerfully, 'and Topher notices very little about people except their lungs and livers and things — and what he does know he won't tell. He's an old stodge!'

Roger, who had been covertly watching her half-forgotten profile with a growing pleasure, answered in affected gloom. 'I expect we shall all seem pretty stodgy to you now. This isn't the gay world, you know — Soames Green bears very little resemblance to the south of France, and such plutocratic haunts. We haven't even a Casino! But there's a cinema in the Station Road — an innovation since your time. I shall be happy to take you there on my first night out; it's considered rather a desperate spot.'

'I shall be very happy to go. Cinemas are awfully jolly — the worse the better.'

Mr. Celian thought Cicely would be happy to go almost anywhere. There were no signs of her having been spoilt by her sojourn in plutocratic haunts, and she was still, in manner, the unaffected and very much alive young person he had last seen with her thick brown hair hanging down her back. But in appearance she was changed; that hair was now rolled behind her head — swept back, like Lena's, from her forehead, but not nearly so smoothly — the fashionable puffs over her ears were soft and fluffy, and stray curling ends drifted now and then into her merry eyes. Her dress was fashionably severe and scanty, showing the whole of her firm round arms, and she wore a handsome pearl and

diamond ring on her right hand. She was altogether very different, outwardly, from the shabby little girl they had known and loved before she went away, but Mr. Celian hoped and believed that the same girl — happy-souled and kind — survived. She was much more vivid than his own Phœbe, he admitted, but less subtly alluring than Lena. He thought her charming, and hoped Roger thought so too.

Roger did think so. He kept watching her furtively, with a guilty sense that he ought to have no eyes for anyone but Lena. Yet he had a right, after all, to be glad at seeing her again, for this Cicely Briton had been a great little friend of his in his boyhood — it was even true that, as Lena once reminded her aunt, they had in a friendly and unsentimental fashion declared themselves pledged to marry when the time came. But that was long ago — one summer holidays when he was fourteen and Cicely twelve, and no war had arrived to blast the happiness of the world.... She would have forgotten all about that absurd engagement now; she was twenty-two, with an income of her own, and doubtless many young men more eligible than he had been running after her or her income for some years. Men with two arms, too, curse them.... Those jolly lips of hers had probably been kissed ... *he* had never kissed them, even as a boy; she hadn't cared for that sort of thing, preferring to get very hot and to swim and climb trees, even though they'd been going to get married in ten years. It was just ten years now, by Jove!— Had she come back to claim him? he asked himself with a chuckle that nobody heard. Ah, but she was quite probably engaged to someone else by now, even though they'd been told nothing about it. That rich-looking

ring on the wrong hand — it might only be waiting for someone's consent to be transferred. She might have come home principally to obtain that consent.... He felt absurdly depressed at the thought — and then ashamed of the depression. What the hell could it matter to him whether she were engaged or not? What were her lips, kissed or unkissed, to him — who had kissed Lena's and wanted to again? ...

Christopher Briton, sitting opposite his sister between Lena and Phœbe, was enjoying himself in his own quiet and rather ponderous way. It was very pleasant to have Phœbe next him, turning her wildflower eyes to his and sometimes touching him to attract his attention — never far away — even though he could not flatter himself that anything but their usual frank friendliness looked out of those eyes. And it was a real delight to have this young sister home again and to watch her youth and charm with almost the pride and pleasure of a father. He was eighteen years her senior, and with the death of two brothers who had come between — one in childhood, one in the War — he had grown to feel for her an affection more paternal than brotherly. He thought now, with a slow twinge of sadness, that this was all the paternity he was ever likely to know. Phœbe, with all her dear friendliness, which he loved to possess, was blotted out of his personal vision of the future by the figure of Martin Holme. If his human perceptions were not, outside his profession, always very sharp, his feeling for Phœbe at least inspired a right judgment of her in thinking she was not a girl to take the next best if the best were denied. And he might not even be the 'next best.' ... Nor, having pride, would he choose to be taken in such a capacity; he would

rather remain at least the 'best friend.' He believed she regarded him as that.

He was not permitted to enjoy either Phœbe's or his sister's presence very long that evening, for soon after coffee had been served the telephone bell rang and he was summoned to attend a distant patient. Setting his cup down resignedly, he stood up to go, looking regretfully towards the piano, which Cicely had just opened. 'I must miss your songs for another night, Cis — I've got to go right out to Chellon's Farm.'

'Oh, *poor* one! What a beastly shame. What is it — death or birth — or both?'

'Neither just yet. An old woman's bronchitis — but it'll be death pretty soon, I'm afraid.'

'Have you ever' — Cicely asked Phœbe — 'heard Topher grumble whatever time he's called out, night or day? He may be a stodge, but he spoils his patients. *I* should let the old thing go on coughing.'

'My going won't stop it for very long, I fancy.' He turned to the door. 'Shall I look in for you if I'm not late?'

'I'll see her home,' said Roger. 'It's a long and dangerous journey, but we'll pull through.'

When they braved those perils later on, there was a placid moon shining down on the canal from the south, and Cicely stopped to lean on the stone parapet of the bridge. 'How topping it is here, Roger! . . . Just look at the water in that moonlight, all yellow and oily and fat. . . . While I was away, whenever I thought of Soames Green I always saw — after home, of course — this bridge, and the timber-yard, and Mulberry Lodge on the other side.'

'I'm glad Mulberry Lodge gets a place — even if it's a neck behind the timber-yard! Don't you really hate being back again? It must be a dull hole after the places you've seen.'

'It doesn't seem dull to me,' said Cicely, patting the cold stone with her warm bare hand. 'But then I don't find things dull — or only very seldom.... And the people here, Roger — it's lovely to find them all just the same. All of you, for instance — I've been happy to be at Mulberry Lodge again.'

'Oh, *us* —!' murmured Roger deprecatingly, though he glowed a little with pleasure. 'We're no great shakes, you know. Just very ordinary people hugger-muggering along in a very small way.'

'Then I like ordinary people and small ways.... But your Guv'nor — he's not ordinary or small, you know — or *don't* you know it?'

'Yes, I do. He's a dear chap.'

'And you' — Cicely went on comfortably —'it's very jolly to find you still here and still the same.'

He thought, with a small wave of depression — 'Ah, but I'm not quite the same...'

He said, 'There's a difference, Cicely.'

'In you?'

'In me.'

'You're grown up now, of course. *Are* you changed? I don't believe you are.'

'Don't you really know what I mean?'

'No. Tell me, Roger.'

'You dense little person!... I can't play golf with you any more, Cicely — or tennis or Badminton or any decent game.... Haven't you ever *noticed* I'm minus one arm?'

She turned towards him quickly and touched his empty sleeve. '*That's* not the sort of change I meant. It isn't a change at all, in my sense; it's rather a sort of proof that you *haven't* changed.... I must go in now — it's cold out here, though the water looks so warm and snug. When will you go for a walk with me?'

He contracted, with alacrity, for the next Saturday afternoon. And recrossing the bridge a minute later, alone, he stopped again to look at the yellow smear of moonlight on the canal, thinking contentedly, 'It's extraordinary nice to have her back here.... But what did she mean, exactly, about my arm?'

When he presently passed Lena's door on his way to bed, he remembered her with a little jump of uneasiness. 'I wonder what *she* wants to do on Saturday? Oh, I suppose she'll go off somewhere with that bloody old man....'

VIII

He said at breakfast the next morning, secretly a little embarrassed, 'I've promised to take Cicely to Challerton Abbey on Saturday afternoon.'

His mother beamed. 'How nice for you both, darling — I do hope it'll keep fine. What are the other plans?'

Phœbe answered, 'The Guv'nor and I are going to the Rugby match at Sanstone; I don't know if Lena means to come too.'

'I don't, thanks. It doesn't intrigue me at all.' Lena glanced meditatively at Roger. 'Have you forgotten, O faithless one, that you asked *me* to go for a walk on Saturday?'

'I say, did I really?' He searched his memory

hurriedly, without result. 'Of course if you say so I humbly apologise. Shall I put Cicely off or will you come too?'

'Oh, let her come, too,' said Lena graciously, but with a significant change of pronoun which he uncomfortably observed.

'Isn't it rather a long way for you to walk?' he suggested, avoiding her eye. 'Why not get old Daddy Somerdew to drive you there?'

'I could, I dare say. I only thought I was engaged to walk with you. But I can easily do something else if I've been superseded! Take your Cicely and welcome.'

Mrs. Celian soothingly interposed, 'I'm sure Alfred would be delighted to take the three of you. He's got lots of room in his billy, or whatever the thing's called. He told me so, only he won't put young ladies there all alone. Ring him up, Lena dear, and ask him.'

'I think I won't, Aunt Amy. I rather like waiting to be asked, you know! ... We'll see what happens between now and Saturday.'

Roger, remaining silent after having said the wrong thing, was left uncertain whether, if nothing happened before then, Lena would walk with him and Cicely, or whether she considered herself slighted and would expect Cicely to be put off, or whether — oh, damn it, what *did* she mean or want him to do?

For the first time he had a doubt of her veracity, which — while admitting her habit of device — he had never actually called in question before. *Had* he ever promised to take her out on that particular Saturday afternoon? He could almost swear he hadn't.... Or was she, just possibly, a bit of a dog-in-the-manger,

inclined to resent any hint of a transferred allegiance? ... It was a very minor hint, after all — and after all did she give *him* so much that she had any right to resent a transferring? What about old Alfred? Hadn't Roger been put aside often enough in favour of the blasted Sunbeam? ... These inward questions left his spirits depressed and his face rather glum. He hoped his perfectly legitimate pleasure in Cicely's return was not going to be spoilt all the time by this sort of thing....

'Roger darling, are you leaving yourself plenty of time?' his mother asked as he helped himself absently to more marmalade.

'Roger's not an office-boy, Aunt Amy. He's a man and a publisher and he saunters to the office when it suits him.'

Lena was evidently in an exasperating mood this morning; perhaps later on she would be pleasanter about Saturday. To be unpleasant was scarcely the way to draw him back to her if she felt he was in danger of drifting away... or *was* it? He was by no means prepared yet to incur her lasting displeasure, even though at the moment he felt independent and sore. And at the thought that perhaps she might really discard him altogether — deny him even the brief gentlenesses, the rare, slow kisses she sometimes allowed — he felt rather cold and sick at heart. He couldn't — yet — sacrifice the disturbing, hurting privilege of this baffled and baffling intimacy for the sake of Cicely Briton's unmysterious jolliness.

Lena pushed her chair away from the table, dropped her napkin, and, stooping to pick it up, supported herself with a hand on his knee. And at that pressure, that

careless yet deliberate gesture of restoration to favour, the blood rose slowly in his face. No; if she cared to draw him back, he hadn't very far to come....

The problem of Saturday, whatever solution Mr. Somerdew might have offered in the meantime, was finally solved by the inclusion of both Cicely and Lena in the projected walk. Lena had brought it about by saying affably to Roger as he put on his coat before leaving for London, 'Well, Sultan — am I to be allowed to come with you to-day?'

'Of course you can,' he replied, his heart sinking nevertheless. 'Cicely'll be delighted.'

'Ah,' Lena drawled, 'I wasn't exactly thinking of delighting *her*.'

She removed a hair from his sleeve, and smiled up at him with such provocative charm that only the precariousness of their solitude prevented his stooping his mouth to hers. But the refraining was so palpable that, with her smile sliding into a laugh, she laid the back of her hand for an instant against his lips.

As he climbed the station path, he wondered sardonically whose pleasure, if not Cicely's, she was consulting by her decision; or had her real intention — little minx — been that of annoying rather than 'delighting' Cicely? As usual, he concluded, with a return of the faint gloom her smile and touch had dissipated, it was quite impossible to guess what Lena was 'up to.' The physical attraction still holding him did not obscure his perception that she was generally up to something. Her methods of dealing with life were rarely spontaneous, even if her objective happened to be a legitimate and harmless one.

The walk was successful enough on the surface, as outings with Cicely Briton were apt to be, owing to her happy conviction that they could not be anything else. She was unaware of any preceding friction, and, though she would have been happier to have her old friend to herself, she had experienced no pronounced pangs when, on calling for her, Roger said casually, 'Lena's coming too; I forgot we'd arranged to go out somewhere to-day.'

Cicely felt, at the time, neither intruded upon nor intruding, and saw to it that at least nobody was bored during the long walk northward across the water-meadows. But if, being simpler-minded than Lena, she was less completely sophisticated in spite of her wider acquaintance with the world, she was still considerably more sophisticated than Phœbe; and before they reached Challerton her shrewdness had already made fairly clear to her not only Roger's uneasy state of soul, but the motive which had impelled Lena to take a much longer walk than she really cared about.

Cicely's nature, though not essentially shallower than Phœbe's, was of a very different type, lighter in texture and more susceptible to the commoner flaws of feminine temperament. It was impossible for Phœbe to compete for any man's affection, and once in possession she could never have fought for its preservation. If her own love and loyalty were not enough to guard her from depredation, it was not in her nature to use other weapons. But Cicely, capable of equal love and loyalty, had a much more combative spirit under her gaiety; she enjoyed a little harmless intriguing for an innocent purpose, and was always ready to defeat someone else's purpose if she believed it not so innocent. And on this occasion, having satisfied herself that Lena was only

interested in Roger for the amusement of his interest in her — suspecting, too, that she meant to frustrate any threatened encroachments — Cicely said to herself with exhilaration, 'Very well, my lady, we'll see! He was *my* friend first, even if he's your cousin all the time, and he shan't be coerced into obliging you with his exclusive admiration.... You're too old for him, anyhow!'

If, to a young man of four-and-twenty, a girl of twenty-two were more beguiling than one of twenty-eight, Cicely had that initial advantage. Nor did she at all forget, as Roger modestly assumed, the mutual devotion of their younger days, and she was not too young still to be aware that the nicer type of man can generally be approached through the avenue of sheer sentiment, which his emotions tend to accept even though his reason may counsel rejection.

Cicely's quickly formed intention was neither quite disinterested nor idly malicious. She had as a child adored this now crippled boy; at sixteen, seeing him just before their long separation, stiff and yet nonchalant in the first glory of his khaki, she had found him no less worthy of ardent admiration; and during that interval of six years, exposed meanwhile to the advances of more brilliant and eligible and handsome men of many types, she had failed to find anyone who quite usurped Roger's special place in her unspoilt heart, even though there had been some temporary displacements and alien thrills.

And now, finding him again, grown to be definitely a man, though a very young one still, still with his boyish face — short-nosed and full-chinned like a good-looking pug-dog — still the same but for that pathetic

and endearing physical difference of a missing arm, now it seemed to her, with a sensation of happy peace, that nobody she had met in the meantime had been any nicer than he. She felt pleasantly entitled, therefore, to make a bid for his affection again, since she was very certain not only that Lena had no genuine feeling for him, but that he was not in the least genuinely in love with Lena.

'It's that red mouth of hers!' Cicely decided, without envy in her scorn — having a very charming mouth of her own — and reaching something very near the root of the matter without recourse to subtlety of expression. 'That mouth and that air of mystery.... If poor Roger hadn't been always — except for the trenches, bless him — in a place like Soames Green, he wouldn't look at her.'

If, on the other hand, Cicely underestimated a fascination less limited in extent than she blithely assumed, it was not unnatural in a girl who for the last few years had been — in London and India and on the Continent — very considerably 'looked at' herself.

For Roger, walking sometimes between and sometimes behind the two girls on the narrow meadow road, the expedition was more agitating than strictly agreeable, though Cicely contrived to make it superficially entertaining. The direction of their talk was left mainly to her, Roger being nervous of in some way laying himself open to Lena's immediate or subsequent satire, and Lena as usual consulting her own preference in regard to speaking or remaining silent; though perhaps her preferences were themselves subject to expediency. On that day she spoke rather seldom, Cicely's expansiveness not requiring very much in others; but she laughed

amiably when a laugh was indicated, admired the colour of the woods against the remote blue of the winter sky, and professed herself not at all tired by the length of their walk.

The short day was ending as they neared Challerton, and their first view of the Abbey spire showed it already deserted by the sun, its high pinnacle sombrely piercing a sky the colour of a bruised peach. They went into the Abbey before having tea; and in that atmosphere of antiquity, in the shadowed aisles where the lingering daylight made the tapers look futile and wan, Roger became aware of a sudden intensifying of his inmost emotions, a sudden oddly blended sensation of conflict and great peace. Leaning his crippled shoulder against a pillar, his cap crumpled against his chest, he stared up frowningly at the high east window, in which the old blues and crimsons and greens were now sobered to solemn and wistful hues by the dying light beyond.

But that lovely monument to Man's hope that all human conflict will one day slip into eternal peace brought no solution of his own immediate problems to the young and vaguely agnostic human being who stood staring up at it with a faint stirring of unconscious appeal in his heart. The subdued colours winked and ran together in a soft blur as the tapers below gathered strength, and little points of light shone from the great crucifix hanging behind the altar. Roger found himself thinking, with a sigh and no profane intention — 'If only Christ hadn't been such a celibate, things might be a bit easier for the rest of us. . . .'

IX

At the dinner-table some evenings later he conveyed to Lena his firm's gratifying decision to publish — subject to slight expansion and revision — her book of verse.

Mr. Celian turned to his niece at once with genuine kindly congratulation; and, remembering an earlier conviction of remissness, he added, 'I hope you'll bring the poems to me to read before they go back to Town. Will you?'

'Yes, Uncle Peter.' She showed no sign of sharing his recollection. 'Roger's brought them down with him, so you can see them to-night, if you like.'

'I do like. Bring them to my room after dinner. And bring a book to amuse yourself with while I'm raking for opportunities to carp! I shall criticise, you know.'

'I hope you will,' she replied, with the air of old-fashioned docility she sometimes assumed towards him. He often wondered why it was reserved only for him and why she thought it worth while to affect a meekness that could scarcely be real.

She came to his room later on with her typescript and a book under her arm. 'There's my child, Uncle Peter.' She laid the bundle at his elbow and took the leather chair on the farther side of the hearth. 'Remember it's born a little prematurely, and be tender to defects.'

Adjusting his spectacles, he smiled at her over the gold rims. 'I'm likely to be rather partial. After all, it's almost a grandchild.'

He was surprised to see a sudden colour stain her cheeks; and, stammering a little, in a manner wholly foreign to her habitual self-possession, she answered, 'Oh — if you feel like that... perhaps you *will* be

kind....' She turned sideways in the big chair, hurriedly propped her book on its arm and began to read.

Mr. Celian thought, 'She's actually nervous — this iron-nerved being! ... It must be her vanity, then, otherwise my opinion wouldn't touch her.'

He turned the typed pages, pausing at the dedication with a wrinkled brow. 'To the Memory of a Lost Battle.'... What did that signify? No battle of her own, surely, for she usually emerged as a victor, and was unlikely to commemorate a defeat, if she had surprisingly encountered one.... He asked doubtfully, 'They're not *war*-poems, I hope?'

'Oh, dear, no.'

'This dedicatory "battle" rather suggests they are.'

'I suppose it might.'

'But it's not meant so?'

'It's not meant so.'

He had to be content with that, conceiving it impertinent in a mere uncle to enquire further into the symbolism of her chosen word. It was tolerably certain, also, that enquiry would lead nowhere; and having himself no fondness for defeat in an exchange of wits, he preferred not to enter the field. He settled down in silence to a careful reading of the poems.

He found them of varying merit; but the general level was much higher than he had expected, having seen little of her work before, and nothing at all for the last few years. Her talent had matured, and here and there he was conscious of something much more than talent — of a breath, a cool and invigorating wind that blew, though fitfully, from those spaces where greatness walks.... He thought ungrudgingly, 'There's just a

touch of genius in these things. One must forgive her a good deal for that.'

He ventured presently on a few critical comments, feeling nervous of hurting her pride; but her own momentary discomfort seeemed to have vanished, and she considered and discussed his suggestions with an intelligent impartiality and lack of self-consciousness that he could admire. Her vanity in this direction at least had no petty sensitiveness, or none that he could detect, and she was perfectly willing to adopt some of the alterations he tentatively proposed.

He lingered for some time over one short lyric called 'The Charge,' and presently turned back to it again, arrested not by its poetic quality, which was inferior to that of the other poems, but by its theme. He read it, softly, aloud.

'This was your cruelty: a lonely child
Gave you a human heart, not undefiled
By evilness, yet potent still for good
Could it have been more gently understood.

'Your heart ignored the gift. Your strange heart turned
From that rich offering, in which there burned
A flame of worshipping that might have been
Death to the creeping evil you had seen.

'O pitiful! That lost child's heart still weeps,
In spoilt maturity, for what it keeps
Of sick remembrance of a beauty slain;
Gropes for the perished good, and weeps again.'

Mr. Celian paused. 'That's a curious poem, Lena. I wonder how you came to write it.'

She had listened to his reading of it with a lifted chin, dropped eyelids, and a small, tight-lipped smile. 'Read

by you,' she admitted mildly, 'it does sound rather curious.... One writes a lot of funny things, Uncle Peter; the exact inspiration can't always be explained.'

'I suppose not.' He read again —

> 'A flame of worshipping that might have been
> Death to the creeping evil you had seen.'

I should be very sorry for the person to whom that applied — but more bitterly sorry for the one it was directed against. Your "charge" is a very grave indictment, Lena — a heavy responsibility to have to bear.'

'Yes.' She glanced at him briefly, still with a dim and pursed-up smile. 'But the sort that's generally borne unawares.... As a matter of fact, there was — originally — another verse, bringing the charge more directly home. But I left it out.'

'Why did you do that?'

She bent over her book again. 'Oh... As Aunt Amy says, "I thought it best."'

Mr. Celian went on reading; and finally said, hoping she would accept his sincerity, 'I congratulate you again, Lena. There's not only considerable promise in these poems, but, in places, considerable achievement. I don't tell you you're a great poet yet, but I think it possible you might become one.... If you care for my opinion at all —?'

She shut her book and stood up, taking the poems from his hand. He saw again in her cheeks that unaccustomed colour, but her smile had a sardonic rather than a gratified curve. 'I do care for it. Thank you very much.... And I'll make the alterations you suggest. Good-night, Uncle Peter.'

He said, 'Good-night, Lena,' and sat for some time

staring at her empty chair. His mind echoed — '*Gropes for the perished good, and weeps again . . .*'

'That's rather a tragic line,' he thought, and laid a fresh log on the fire. The flames, leaping up, reddened the gold rims of his spectacles and turned his bald forehead a deeper pink as he hitched his chair closer to the grate and picked up a book.

CHAPTER FOUR

I

To the three Celians who had formed a habit of keeping a rather furtive and suspicious eye on Lena's movements, it seemed as if there were to be no end to her activities in the matter of instituting new and undesirable intimacies. Not content with emerging from her previous disregard of Martin Holme into the light of a friendship with him obnoxious to all three critics, nor with parading an equally distasteful conquest of Mr. Somerdew, she now developed a strange ardour for the society of Flora Holme, even extending her graciousness to Flora's simple sister Maggie.

She spent a considerable part of her days at the End House, not always at times when Martin could be the direct attraction, and, to avoid neglecting Mr. Somerdew, she persuaded him to be false to his motto of 'little and good' in relation to motor rides; though it was observable that when Flora shared these, it was she who occupied the dicky, while Lena remained at the owner's elbow, either driving the car herself or gaining knowledge of the craft by attention to his more advanced methods.

Mr. Somerdew had presented her by this time with a driving licence, so that her rapidly improving efforts were not now confined to unpoliced solitudes; and she was often seen in charge of the wheel, delivering Mrs. Holme at her door or drawing up magnificently at the gate of Mulberry Lodge in the Sunbeam which was now

a familiar object in Soames Green, though its owner lived ten miles away. It was believed, too, in the town, that Lena visited Mr. Somerdew's house at Wintlebourne oftener than was at all seemly, having tea there — not companioned by Flora at such times — and being driven home before Frank returned.

After her first introduction to that large modern mansion, upon which castellated towers and balconies erupted everywhere in a careless orgy of opulence, Lena made no reference to subsequent visits, and though some of these were surmised by her family critics, exact information was lacking until gossip supplied it to Mrs. Celian through the mouth of Cicely's mother, who called at Mulberry Lodge early in Christmas week expressly to supply it.

Mrs. Briton was one of those black encompassed elderly women who seem to have, externally, no special identity, but to be cut from a negligible pattern, a 'stock line' in human beings which the imagination commonly prices rather low. She wore neither conspicuously shabby nor tasteless garments, but their lack of significance for her personality conveyed an impression of rather dingy accident, the act of selecting and paying for such robes being hard to visualise. Indeed, poor Mrs. Briton's ill-assorted clothing was seldom selected — as a scheme of decoration — by herself, but supplied at a reduced cost and in disconnected oddments by a sister rather less pinched in purse if little more dainty of apparel.

Such powers of intellect as Christopher and Cicely Briton commanded were not the heritage of their mother's confused mentality, but of a father whose brain-power had considerably exceeded his moral sense

and firmness of purpose. But his widow — who mourned him very temperately and with a vague impression that some hardly recognised burden had been removed from her life — possessed well-defined instincts of affection and kindliness; and these, fed by intelligence, had blossomed in her children into a healthy stability of character that seemed incongruous to the contrasted beings who had brought them into the world. Neither Christopher nor Cicely had brilliant intellects, but both were sensible, kind, and happy-natured in their outwardly different ways; and both had that balance of temperament which suggested that Nature, in her fashioning of them, had paused midway between the excess and dearth of their parents, and left them swinging there, pleasantly poised and with a better equipment for life than their progenitors had known.

Owing to the disconnected flow of Mrs. Briton's conversation, it was some time before Mrs. Celian dimly gathered that some expostulation was intended, and even then it was by no means clear to her which member of her family had incurred the implied censure. Amy Celian was a mild-tempered lady, and so secure in her own admiration for her family and the conviction that no error of conduct could ever justly be laid at its door, that the suggestion of error had no bristling effect on her placidity. She smiled inwardly, rather, at the ludicrous idea that Soames Green should consider itself entitled to criticise; and at last, impatient of vague innuendo, she said briskly, 'Now, Florence, do have another crumpet and tell me straight out what it is people are saying. Though people will say *anything*, you know, and it doesn't do to attend to it.'

Mrs. Briton's faded brown eyes, which had never had

the amber brilliance of Cicely's, regarded her hostess a little reproachfully as she pushed higher the black veil rolled across her nose and accepted the proffered crumpet. 'Surely I've been telling you all this time, Amy, what people are saying.... May I help myself to some more salt, dear? I never can get Lottie to remember the salt with crumpets — not that we often have them, though of course *now* dear Cicely says I'm to have them whenever I like. That child's so generous, Amy, I hardly know how to stop her buying, and I've promised against my will to go up to the shops with her — I've insisted on waiting for the sales — though I'm sure I don't want any new clothes at my time of life and she'd much better spend it on herself. When I was a girl — though I never had Cicely's looks — it made me feel a different thing if I had a headache to run out and buy a lace collar or a new ribbon for a hat, but now I don't care for such things and I very seldom have a headache at all. Christopher's a better doctor than I ever came across when I was young — though Sidney Trine was a nice-looking man enough — do you remember Sidney, Amy? He followed old Porthon at Sanstone — a very poor practice or I might be Mrs. Trine now and taking Sidney's remedies instead of Christopher's. But I suppose Christopher wouldn't be alive at all, in that case — or not at all the same Christopher, and I shouldn't like that, so I'm glad Sidney's practice wasn't better, except for him, poor fellow. He married Jenny Carton later on, who had a bit of money herself, and their only son was killed in the War. By a very odd coincidence Lottie's cousin was servant to the Trines when the news came about their boy — he was shot through the neck and died in great pain. I was *so* thankful then that I

hadn't married Sidney, as it might have been Christopher. But it shows how small the world is, as people always say.'

'And that brings us back, Florence, to what people *do* say. You haven't told me so that I can understand. Who is it they're saying their stupid, ill-natured things about? Not my Phœbe, that I'm quite sure.'

'I never said it was Phœbe, Amy. I wouldn't say that for the world, as it wouldn't be true, and I'd be the first to contradict it if it was. But nobody's said a word against the child, and shan't say it twice in my hearing. Such a dear girl, and it does grieve me that she and Christopher don't get any further than they do, though I dare say you think he's much too old and poor for her, but he's the best son I ever knew and they make the best husbands, I've been told. I never saw my poor Granger with his mother, it's true, but I remember old Mrs. Oswald Celian, and your Peter was like a daughter to her, and he's certainly a case in point.... Well, Amy, I don't want to be interfering, you may be very sure, but it's not as if she were your own child, so perhaps you don't notice quite so much, and though girls are so independent now and think they can do anything, however unwise, I do think I'd give her a word of warning if I were you.'

'Are you talking about Lena?' Mrs. Celian patiently asked, putting the cover on the empty muffin dish.

'Of course I am, dear. Haven't I been talking about her all along? You can't have been attending. Such eyes she's got — not a bit like your sister Fanny's, but she's got precisely the same figure, only much slighter and not so tall, and round where Fanny was just a little angular. Of course she must be twenty-eight now

or more, but even so it's a pity to get herself talked about, especially when he's so well known, and people will laugh at him a little sometimes now he's so rich and gay, though I oughtn't to say so, perhaps, considering how he's mixed up with Peter and his boy in the firm too. But there it is, and it's only gossip, it's a pity it should get repeated and exaggerated too, I shouldn't wonder, as things often are. I know when Sidney Trine and I were —'

'Now, Florence —' Mrs. Celian put in firmly — 'do just keep to the point, my dear. Are the silly gossips saying that Lena's too much with Alfred Somerdew? Why, the man could be her father nearly twice over!'

'Yes, Amy, I know he could, and I always point it out, though of course he'd have had to be married almost before he was born; but then, as they say, he *isn't*, you see — not even a relation — and that does give a handle when people want to tell a tale. It's the going to Flamborough Hall, I think, that really makes them talk, and she never waits till Frank gets home, so it's a little as if they didn't want him to know she's there.'

'Flamborough Hall? Do they say she goes there with Alfred?'

'They do say it, certainly, and it may not be at all true, only Lottie's young man's brother is postman at Wintlebourne and I suppose he sees the car going in and out and gets to know who the young lady visitors are. For I'm told Lena isn't the only one Alfred Somerdew likes to have driving with him now and then, but it seems she's there oftener than anybody now, and it really does seem rather a pity, for such a handsome girl might do much better with a younger man. Only, I dare say, as you said yourself, one oughtn't to believe

a word of it, but I thought I'd just give you a friendly hint, and I think you might mention it to her or get Peter to say something. He's got so much influence in the town — the Somerdews'll never be to Soames Green what the Celians are, in spite of legacies, as you must know well enough yourself. Well, Amy dear, I must be getting back — I've got so much to do, though Cicely says I'm to have a woman to do every stitch of darning and mending in future. I wouldn't *hear* of it if it weren't that my eyes *are* getting weak for black, especially at night, and it's a pleasure to let the child have her way. Though I shall really miss looking after dear Christopher's socks; he always wears them out under his big toe, just as his father did before him. I'd thought of getting Annie Stoll, who works at the Vicarage now and then; she's clever with her needle and a nice-mannered girl, too, though Christopher says she has adenoids. What should you advise, Amy?'

'About the darning? Oh, Annie Stoll, undoubtedly; you couldn't do better, and the Stolls will be so glad of a bit extra. Well, Florence, if you really must go I mustn't keep you. I'll remember what you've said about Lena, but I don't think you'll find there's anything in it. She's not at all a flighty girl, you know — and in these days quite nice girls do things that *our* mothers would have whipped us for! There's no harm in them, I'm sure — and Alfred's such a kind fellow.'

Mrs. Celian went with her visitor to the door, and looked out into the darkness after her for a minute or two, hugging herself with her arms, to see whether the few flakes of snow drifting across the shaft of light from the hall really meant business or not. Deducing from the tingling in her finger-tips that they certainly

did, and that it would be a white Christmas, which would be very jolly, she went back to the warmth of her fireside; where Peter, returning early after a slack day at the office, presently found her with her nose nodding towards the ample curve of her figure under its purple jersey.

She lifted her head sharply at his entrance, with that air of smiling defiance common to people who have been caught dozing, and received his kiss affectionately. 'How nice to have you home so soon, darling. I'll ring for fresh tea.'

When it had been brought, and she had prepared two slices of his favourite brown-bread toast, she remembered the purport of Mrs. Briton's visit, which her short sleep had pleasantly dispelled. 'Peter... Florence Briton's been here to-day. I hardly know what to think about what she told me, but you'll know best... *Is* Lena seeing too much of Alfred, do you think?'

'Too much for *my taste*, certainly.'

'Oh, darling, he was your partner, you know!' The fact of association with Celians always implied for Amy a degree of reverence and immunity from censure. 'But apart from your naughty prejudice, what do you think about it? I really mean to say — is Lena *being seen* with him too much? Florence says people are talking about them a little.'

'They're likely to, if they see them together more than three times. This is an age of sex-privilege, we know, but people's tongues haven't changed. The sight of a male and female in company will always arouse delighted speculation in the minds of an audience — even if the man's in his dotage.'

'Oh, but, dear, Alfred isn't that. He's not more than

sixty, and wonderfully well preserved. But that isn't the point; we know there couldn't be anything of *that* sort between them, even in just a frivolous way — Lena's such a quiet girl. . . . But Florence says her Lottie's young man's brother sees Lena going to Alfred's house rather a lot, and perhaps that is just rather a pity — though Lena has only mentioned going there *once*, and I dare say the rest isn't true.'

Mr. Celian smiled, not very kindly. '*I* shouldn't dare say it. But it's Lena's affair, you know. She isn't a child.'

'That's what I feel. Only she might be grieved to know her innocent actions are talked about and twisted a little. Oh, dear' — sighed Mrs. Celian, whose own actions had never given rise to scandalous misinterpretation — 'I wonder why people are so ready to think badly of people? I'm sure the world isn't such a wicked place that one need suppose there's anything wrong going on until one knows it.'

Mr. Celian's smile lost its acid quality and grew gentle as he stretched out a hand and laid it on his wife's knee. This faith of hers in the goodness of a world, whose evils had mercifully passed by at least one kind and unsuspecting inhabitant, struck him as rather touching, and also as rebuking to his own want of charity where Lena was concerned. 'Dear old lady — wicked sees as wicked does! You've a divine blindness born of virtue. . . . What do you want me to do?'

She stroked his hand. 'I don't know about *virtue*, darling. I often get very impatient with the maids, and I'd be rather a lazybones if I had my way. . . . Do you think you could give Lena a hint? I think it might be only a kindness to her.'

'I'll try, if you like. But Lena doesn't always take correction very kindly; and I fancy she's quite indifferent to what Soames Green chooses to think of her actions.'

'Oh, Peter, she wouldn't be! One mustn't mind people's chatter if one is doing what's right, but no self-respecting girl likes to give rise to gossip if it can be avoided.'

'I see.' Mr. Celian drily accepted the axiom without other comment. 'Well, if I find an opportunity I'll suggest to Lena that it might be avoided in this instance. But I don't hold out much hope that she'll be guided by me.'

'I'm sure she will,' his wife replied comfortably, giving his hand a final pat. 'I'm sure she has the greatest respect for your judgment — and, after all, living in your house as she does, she'll feel she owes you some regard for your wishes.'

'H'm.... Some debts' — said Mr. Celian, opening his tobacco-pouch — 'are not very keenly felt, you know.... And I certainly shan't remind her of this one.'

II

Snow fell steadily all through that night. Phœbe had seen a thick drift on her window-sill when she went to bed, and while she lay awake she knew by the deepened quietness of the town that its streets were being slowly muffled in whiteness. Voices reached her now and then from the bridge, but no sound of footsteps, and gradually the atmosphere acquired that sense of strangeness and mystery which falling snow produces at night. Phœbe pictured it floating, gently inexorable, down through the darkness onto the familiar roofs and gar-

dens of Soames Green, thicker and thicker, till not a red tile or patch of green grass was left. She thought of the End House under that slow, soft, soundless smothering, its old slate roof turning whiter and whiter, its lawns and hedges blotted out, its trees draped.... Beneath that roof Flora Holme would be lying in her room facing the water-meadows, thinking — dear God, *what* thoughts? What memories or hopes were stored in that mind to make her nights ghastly or sweet? ... And in the next room Martin was now, perhaps, just going to bed. But on the thoughts that might be filling Martin's mind, Phœbe did not trust herself to dwell. And in the very effort of dismissing them, turning on her side and resolutely shutting her eyes, she found their lashes wet.

The snow went on falling till breakfast-time, but after that the sun conquered and shone upon a Soames Green very seasonably transformed. The streets were soon churned into slush by the traffic, but on roof and wall and garden the snow lay thick and glistening in the sunshine, and showed no sign of melting.

The drawing-room at Mulberry Lodge, with a glass door opening onto the lawn and two windows onto the canal, was flooded with the augmented light from the snow outside; and Lena, going in there to find a book, stood still a moment to observe that peculiar hard brightness which rested equally upon everything, giving no shadows, but heightening the colour and clarity of every object in the room.

The door into the garden was open, and little heel-pads of snow lay on the polished boards inside. As they caught her eye, Mr. Celian appeared in the doorway and stood scraping his boots on the wire mat.

'I forgot to do this just now,' he said, seeing his niece. 'I shall be so scolded for making that mess on the floor! Be a little brick, Lena, and get a cloth, and we'll mop it up without a word to your aunt.'

It occurred to him in her absence that he might make use of this opportunity to give her the promised hint. Apart from his innate dislike for interference and fault-finding, it might be illuminating to hear what she had to say.

When she had removed all traces of his offence, he went and stood on the hearth-rug, kicking the lately kindled log-fire into a brighter blaze. 'Look here, Lena, a word with you.... It appears that our neighbours are concerning themselves with your movements.'

'My movements?' She stood watching him gravely, cloth in hand. 'What do you mean, exactly?'

He thought irrelevantly how dainty and clear she looked in that penetrating, unnatural snow-brightness — ivory and ebony... what was that fairy-tale? — Snow-white and Rose-red....

He answered, 'Have a cigarette while I try to make myself clear. Here's a match.... It seems that somebody's menial — so are our romances bemired! — has reported rather frequent visits of yours to Flamborough Hall — somebody, in short, suggests an unseemly excess. ... Is it true, I wonder?'

'True that I go there, or go to excess?'

'Oh, well — we'll only trouble about the excess, I think. This isn't the nineteenth century... I've no right and no wish to interfere in your affairs, my dear Lena, but perhaps for your own sake it's as well to let you know what people say.... I know it may be great nonsense and you probably know your own business best,

but there it is!' He felt he was being rather ineffectual, and stooped to knock out his pipe, wishing he had not opened the subject at all.

Lena said, 'Are you asking me not to go about with Mr. Somerdew?'

'Good gracious, no! You're not a minor, to be supervised and dictated to.... I shouldn't dream of even "asking" you not to amuse yourself in your own way. But if you care for what the general public, represented by this village, says or thinks, you know now what it says — and God only knows what it thinks!' He smiled round at her, polishing the bowl of his pipe and hoping she would go.

She drew nearer the door by advancing into the middle of the room, but paused there, resting one hand on a table. 'You take your duty to me very lightly, Uncle Peter!'

'*My* duty? ... What is my duty to you, Lena?'

She looked down at the table, moving its little silver ornaments into aimless patterns. 'Some uncles would think it their duty to command me to behave as they desired.... You don't even ask me to please you in any way.'

Mr. Celian laughed. 'Nobody enjoys being defied. I avoid the unpleasantness by not commanding. And as to asking — you must forgive me, my dear niece, for reminding you that you're rather apt to please yourself!'

Lena, her head still bent, lifted her eyes to his for a moment in a glance of grave reproach. Then she, too, laughed, and moved abruptly to the door. 'You must forgive *me*, my dear uncle, for reminding you that you've never made a personal request that I've ever refused.... If you think that over, you'll find it's pretty

accurate. And I'll think over what you've said about Mr. Alfred. I don't, candidly, trouble much about the general public, but if my behaviour distresses *you* — or Aunt Amy —?' She paused with her hand on the door.

How could he tell her that her behaviour — lately, especially — nearly always distressed or irritated him? Her behaviour with Roger, with Martin, with Alfred Somerdew.... It was all so much a part of herself, that self that moved secretly along its chosen path, incomprehensible and essentially alone....

'Your aunt merely thought I'd better mention what she'd heard; she thought it fairer to you. I don't think she's personally much disturbed. She thinks — as I do — that you're quite capable of taking care of yourself.' He did not add how different those sources of conviction were.

'I see,' said Lena, turning the door-handle. 'Then it's really left for me to do as I like? — you don't ask me to change my ways?'

'Oh... as to that, I *might* suggest your being a little more circumspect.... Take Alfred farther afield! His gay ways are too well known in these parts.'

'*Gay!*' she echoed, with an intonation lost on him. 'Well, I'll do as you ask, Uncle Peter; I'll be more careful.' The door shut softly upon her.

To the closed panels Mr. Celian murmured, 'You strange being!... And why this stress laid on *my* pleasure?'

Running his mind in review over the years since he had grown up, he had to admit that, challenged, he could remember no occasion when she had gone against his definitely expressed wish. But then — how often had he risked refusal by asking? She didn't, surely,

resent the lack of opportunities for pleasing him rather than herself! He had always, indeed, scrupulously avoided making any request which, by implying expectation of favours for benefits forgot, might seem to put any check on her independence, or make her feel that his guardianship gave him a claim on her compliance. She had a hundred pounds a year of her own since she came of age, and beyond house-room and board she was now practically no expense to him. She dressed herself out of her own income and spent any margin there might be as she chose. There was actually very little question of 'claim' between them at all. She was his sister-in-law's child, so there was not even blood-relationship, and he hoped he had always made it clear to her that he did not regard her as in his debt. Yet to-day she had seemed dimly to imply that he was entitled to make a claim — though she had tangled that up, too, by speaking of his duty to *her*....

'Oh, confound the girl!' he thought finally, by no means for the first time. 'I wish to God she'd come out into the open and let us know what it's all about. Perhaps some day she will — and then I dare say I shan't like it much.'

III

He did not like, anyhow, what appeared to be the immediate result of his interference. If she saw less of Mr. Somerdew — and he could not be sure that she did — she filled the blank with Martin Holme, and absorbed Roger into her spare hours, consequences which Mr. Celian had failed to foresee.

Christmas Day fell on a Sunday, and Martin took a week's holiday from the preceding Wednesday. Lena

frequented the End House during the intervening days, and her uncle met her once, walking with Martin through the lower village. He pretended not to be aware of them, but staring into Simmonds's window he saw, reflected in the glass, that they turned down the road to Martin's house. In the evening Lena retreated with Roger to the morning-room, ostensibly to discuss a new poem, and Mr. Celian saw her no more that night. He wished very much that he had not interfered.

The prospect of Christmas Day did not tend to cheer him, its scheme of merriment seeeming to him indiscreetly planned; for Mrs. Celian — her apprehension on Phœbe's account long since dissolved — had invited the Holmes to lunch. Her husband suspected Lena's agency, in spite of the plea put forward at his first demur. 'Dear Peter, you *won't* mind, will you? They're rather pathetic — those two poor things — it seems they have no relations to go to or to ask — perhaps *his* aren't very anxious to invite his wife — and Christmas is so sad all alone. There's only that silly Maggie — poor little soul, I don't mean to be unkind — to cheer them up. I thought it would be a kindness.'

'All right, Amy, all right,' he agreed. 'We'll hope they'll both feel it so. Of course I don't mind, old lady — don't think it; you can perform your charitable acts with a light heart.'

Those acts included an invitation to the Briton family also, Mrs. Briton having nervously shrunk from Cicely's proposal of running up to London for a few days. So the Celian dining-room accommodated a party of ten — at least five of whom, Mr. Celian estimated, must be to some extent disturbed by the presence of at least one other, a state of affairs which he felt to be not very

conducive to whole-hearted gaiety. Christopher Briton, he supposed, would have only one thought, but Phœbe must be suffering from Martin's proximity to both Flora and Lena, and Martin might naturally be oppressed by his triple complication; Lena had to contend with whatever mischief she had on her hands with regard to Roger and Holme — though her state was perhaps one of enjoyment rather than discomfort — and Roger was almost obviously divided between jealousy of Martin and an inclination to veer in Cicely's direction.... And as he blandly watched them all from the head of the table, Mr. Celian added another to his estimated five, for Flora Holme showed signs of being not very happy in her mind about Lena's friendship with her husband.

'Dear, dear, dear!' thought the watchful host, in amusement and dismay. 'What is to come of all this collision of desires? How absurd and sad and interesting it all is — or would be if one weren't all the time so worried for fear Roger and Phœbe shouldn't come out of it happily.... I believe Roger will, in the end; thank God, that nice Briton child has come back to divert his interest. But Phœbe —? What chance of happiness is there for her in this mêlée?'

Christopher Briton was contributing to it just then so far as he knew how, but his lighter mood seemed to soar no higher than a dissertation, less monosyllabic than usual, on the habits of butterflies.

'He's just too heavy,' Mr. Celian thought regretfully. 'He's a very good, sound, admirable fellow, and Phœbe's a serious-minded little person in her way, but she wants a lighter touch.'

Since human society, however, has mercifully acquired the art of skimming a surface and ignoring the

gaping depths beneath, that Christmas luncheon passed off with as much outward conviviality as such occasions commonly afford; and if no one else was entirely at ease, at least Mrs. Celian and Mrs. Briton were enviably free from care. Mrs. Briton's method of enjoyment was not of a particularly infectious type; she seldom stopped talking and her neighbours seldom gathered the exact drift of her speech, but as she left few loop-holes for comment, and as Mrs. Celian and Phœbe, who sat next to her, were familiar with the manner — and generally the matter — of her discourse, no harm was done on either side, and her ceaseless rambling flow served to fill up the gaps in conversation that now and then occurred.

Mr. Celian drew one small comfort from his unobtrusive observations; for at an instant when most of the party were absorbed in talk, he saw Martin cautiously raise his eyes and let them rest for a long moment on Phœbe's face. And in that unguarded moment Phœbe's father read in the young man's expression a wistful hunger which dispelled his recent fear that her reign was at an end.

Unconsciously he held his breath, with an ache of memory for lost days when he could so have looked at a woman — one woman — himself; and his lips framed in an unregarded whisper the words — '"*Anch, io son' pittore*"...'

Victory, then, had not gone to Lena yet. If he rightly assumed that she consciously and deliberately played for Phœbe's defeat, she must, being highly intelligent, realise that it would be uphill work. Phœbe was not the type to be lightly and capriciously loved and laid aside. And it suddenly occurred to Mr. Celian that there

might be in this niece of his an inverted, or perverted, sporting instinct, a half-unhealthy, half-magnificent appetite for victory in a losing game rather than for the capture of an easy prize. Whatever subsidiary value the admiration of Roger and Alfred Somerdew might have for her greedy vanity, they were probably only used as tools in her primary design upon Martin Holme.

How definite in intention and genuine emotion that design might be, her uncle could not estimate. For a campaign begun in idle rivalry does not always end there, and emotions have been known to spring startlingly upwards, to quite uncalculated heights, from seeds that were originally implanted in very light and shallow soil. But Mr. Celian doubted still whether Lena's heart — that too-secluded organ — were not inexorably limited in soaring power by its apparent invulnerability to simple pain.

The afternoon passed rather draggingly, occupied with a little Bridge, a little music and talk, and much eating of chocolates and the usual Christmas confections. There was in everybody an inclination to Sunday afternoon drowsiness, which Mrs. Briton alone permitted herself to indulge. Sitting upright on a sofa by the big fire, she very soon rested her chin on the large medallion ornamenting her conveniently moulded bosom, and went unaffectedly and not quite soundlessly to sleep.

Soon after tea, for which appetite was generally lacking, the party dispersed to prepare for the further entertainment of a dinner and dance at Flamborough Hall. The Celians, Holmes, and Britons were all invited, and all — with the exception of Mrs. Briton, whose capacity

for festival was limited by slight atrophy — drove together the ten miles of snow-muffled roads in a motor omnibus hired from the local garage. Mrs. Celian, scenting Bridge in the offing, was undaunted by her considerable fear that, though there were no horses to slip, they might all be stuck in the snowdrift for hours and catch their deaths in low necks and thin shoes. But her husband, already tired and sleepy and wishing he might stay home, reassured her with the fact that the snow was only six inches deep and unlikely to fall any more from a sky alight with stars.

He wished inwardly that the roads might have been impassable, to save him from the tediousness of some six hours in the house of a man he disliked. He foresaw little prospect of joy for any of their party, except for Cicely, who derived joy from mere living, for Lena, who would have her hands very full, and for his wife, who, apart from her personal zest for cards, would be convinced that the young people were having a splendid time and be doubly content.

Old Mr. Somerdew, as the affluent and affable host, outshone all his guests in the appearance of enjoyment, though some of them might feel their own spirits tending a little downwards in the heavy breeze of his hilarity. His immaculate attire, which seemed mutely to protest against the sartorial convention of mere black and white, was smartened by the novelty of a single eyeglass on a broad black ribbon, and he wore a damask carnation in his buttonhole.

About twenty guests sat down to dinner, the Soames Green contingent being scattered in the crowd, for which Mr. Celian assumed they must, after a long day's proximity, be thankful; forgetting that love, like a moth,

prefers the risk of singeing to the removal of the chosen flame.

Crackers were pulled during dessert, paper caps donned and mottoes read out, Alfred Somerdew being foremost in all this orthodox liveliness, declaiming the dull and worn-out couplets as though they were gems of wit, his eyes roguishly rolling in the shadow of a frilled sun-bonnet with pink ribbons tied in a bow about his lean throat. His late partner, regarding him from a distance, thought him unutterably tiresome, viewed as anything but a buffoon, and wondered how any calculation of Lena's could possibly be cogent enough to make his attentions tolerable after this revelation of bonhomie. He watched with interest, when the dancing began, to see whether among such a plurality of charmers she would still be singled out, and if so whether she could still bring herself to be gracious. He observed that, though Alfred did not too much neglect his duties as host or his reputation as an incorrigible gallant, Lena was obviously the most favoured of the bevy of young women he doubtless delighted to call his 'hareem.' He danced with more pertinacity than art, taking very small and rather stuttering steps, sawing the air a good deal with his left arm, and gripping his partners so fervently against his breast that his eyeglass ribbon grew slowly white with the powder from their cheeks as he murmured his irrepressible drolleries into their captive ears.

Catching a glimpse of Lena thus pinioned, her bland profile evading, by small movements, entanglement in the swinging ribbon, Mr. Celian thought disgustedly, 'She *can't* be taking the fellow seriously? ... Why, he's not even a knave — he's just a second-rate fool posing as Don Juan.' She had always, formerly, suffered fools

with undisguised sadness. And looking round the big ball-room under its brilliant chandeliers, decked with holly and mistletoe and many-coloured streamers of ribbon, he thought further, 'Does all this crude lavishness appeal to her? — to *Lena*, with her poetry, her subtlety, her art? ... Incredible.'

He found Frank at his elbow, grinning in mingled mirth and shame as his father's figure, still topped with its sun-bonnet, bore Lena past. 'The old bean!' he murmured discreetly to his colleague. 'He puts us all in the shade, doesn't he?'

'He's a very active man for his age,' Mr. Celian still more discreetly replied.

'Oh, active — ! Yes, he's that, and more.... Do you know where Phœbe is, sir? I thought I was booked for this with her.'

Her father could supply no information, and Frank wandered away. But a moment later Mr. Celian heard his voice, raised in bantering reproach. 'Oh, I say, Phœbe, you base deserter! — this was *my* dance.'

Phœbe stopped dancing at once, and her father saw that the releasing arm was Martin Holme's. He heard her answer. 'I know it's yours, but you weren't there! You can have what's left.'

Martin, abandoned, looked round the room, and seeing his wife alone in a doorway immediately went to her side.

She said coldly, 'Oh, you've remembered me for a moment, have you?'

Her harassed husband answered truthfully, 'I never forget you, my dear. Would you like to dance?'

'Not with you, thanks; I don't want to be a damper on your enjoyment.'

Thinking sardonically — 'First catch the enjoyment!' — Martin said, 'You won't be unless you resolve to be. ... Come along, Flora — don't be a little donkey.'

'How tactfully persuasive! I don't want to dance ... but you can take me to have some lemonade or something — I'm thirsty.'

'Nonsense,' he said firmly, putting his arm round her. 'Much better dance. One, two, three — come on!'

She gave one upward glance at his nervously smiling but resolute face, and suddenly gave in. They passed Mr. Somerdew a moment later and she saw Lena's dark eyes lift quickly to Martin's as they went by.

Flora's teeth bit sharply into her under lip, and her own eyes closed.

Catching a glimpse of her face, Martin asked, 'Are you feeling all right?'

'Perfectly, thanks.' She heard him sigh softly, but he said no more.

IV

He danced very little for the rest of the evening with anyone but his wife, and Roger was awarded his fair share of such chances of Lena's partnership as were left over by Mr. Somerdew. But he was astonished to find that, after all, his success was not very satisfying. She was the same Lena, yet strangely not the same for him. He felt that the bottom had fallen out of her fascination for him, and wondered why. But when, presently, he put his arm round Cicely again, with an odd sensation of freedom and content, it was borne in upon him that perhaps this easy comradeship — this renewed intimacy with the girl his boyhood had chosen, who seemed not

only unchanged, but more delightfully the same — had released him from the unreal and unhealthy bondage of mere attraction that had held him to his cousin for the last year. And with a long inward sigh of relief, he thought, 'Lena can have her Alfred or her Martin or anyone else she likes. She hasn't got *me* any more.'

He spent with Cicely as much of the remainder of the evening as she would allow, and avoided asking Lena to dance with him again.

Deserted by Roger and momentarily free from Mr. Somerdew's clutch, Lena, finding Martin alone at a little table, took the chair opposite. "Aren't you dancing this? May I stay?'

'Please do. I'll get you some coffee.'

When he returned with it, she lifted her eyes without moving the chin held in her cupped hands, and said amusedly, 'You *are* a model husband! — under the wifely eye, anyhow. Why didn't I guess — in time — how good you'd be?'

'Circumstances alter cases, my dear Lena.'

'Meaning — ? Ah, that's not very pretty of you, my dear Martin! Never mind — I don't really misunderstand. Why aren't you dancing more? I haven't seen you with Phœbe all the evening.'

'She seems impregnably booked up. I had half a dance and then Frank filched her from me.'

'You meekly allowed that? Well, aren't you going to dance with me any more? I feel neglected.'

'*Do* you? Have I had much chance, what with the young and — less young — adorer, let alone others?'

'You must make your own chances, my dear. That's an art that has to be learnt in these days. The devil take

the hindmost.... It's rather hot in here, isn't it? Let's go somewhere cooler.'

He took her to a little dimly lighted alcove, much frequented by their host, but empty just then. It held one small plush settee.

'Martin,' said Lena, with a complete change of tone and laying one hand on his knee, 'are you awfully unhappy?'

He tried to laugh; but, very conscious that night of a deplorable lack of happiness, added, 'Yes ...'

'Poor dear... poor dear.' Her sympathetic hand moved backwards and forwards, gently stroking. 'It'll end, Martin — somehow; it can't go on.... Why don't you end it?'

'How can I end it? ... Don't talk like this, Lena. I'm a cad ever to have let you know how bad it is. And you *don't* know' — murmured poor Martin — 'how bad it is.'

'You mean you haven't told me.'

Suddenly apprehensive of how much he might unwittingly have let her infer, he answered, 'Well, I suppose I've let you see that I mind things a good deal. I oughtn't to have. And I oughtn't to mind too much. It's my own fault, in a sense — to some extent.... Lena, let's go and dance.'

She said gently, 'Yes, my dear, come and dance with me,' and leaning forward kissed his cheek.

To Martin, who for eight years had kissed no one but his now unloved wife, the bitterness of being kissed at last by anyone but Phœbe seemed almost overwhelming. And seeing his face as they emerged into the full light, Lena whispered — 'Don't look like that, Martin! — quick — *smile!*'

As they moved out into the ball-room, less crowded at this late hour, she said meekly, 'You're not really angry with me?'

'No,' said Martin, whose sick anger was directed far more against circumstance than her.

'You needn't be, you know. There's no particular reason why a man shouldn't kiss a woman he's kissed before — except, of course, the fact that he has!'

Ignoring the shifting of initiative and trying to recover his lightness, Martin answered, 'You mean there's no longer any good reason why he *should?*'

'Well, put it that the reason's changed. Curiosity's not the inspiration any more; knowledge has been substituted for it. Isn't curiosity more to most men's taste?'

'You probably know better than I do,' said Holme.

'Oh — do you credit me with having been kissed so much?'

'I hadn't thought about it,' he answered, crudely truthful. 'What about Roger and dear Alfred?'

'I shouldn't worry about *them!*' Lena said reassuringly, with a faint pressure of his hand.

He longed to tell her — feeling miserably on edge and disgusted with his entire situation — that he didn't worry in the very least about her actions except when they trespassed too much on his own. But reluctant to hurt or offend her, he took refuge in silence. And seeing Flora, alone again and following him with resentful eyes, he thought, 'I wish to God we hadn't come here.'

He wished it more than ever when they reached the End House, for Flora suddenly said aggressively, 'I suppose you've been falling in love while I was away.'

He was surprised into an irritation he could usually control. 'What a silly supposition, then!'

She looked at him sombrely. 'That needn't make it untrue.... And there's powder on your coat-collar.'

He remembered, as he involuntarily glanced down, how Lena had leant against him for a moment when she kissed his cheek. And though that kiss had been none of his own contriving, it could not be truthfully denied. Colouring slowly, he brushed away the white patch. 'It's as likely to be your powder as anyone's. I haven't — this at least was true — ' been embracing anybody, if that's what you mean.'

He saw to his distress, tears spring into her eyes. She knelt suddenly on the floor by him, pressing her face against his sleeve. 'Oh, Martin, you *don't* love anyone better than me — you *don't*, do you?'

Nothing less than a direct lie seemed possible then. 'No, you silly girl,' he said, his face wrinkling with shame above her hidden eyes. 'Get up, Flora — don't be so foolish, my dear. You're just tired.... And look at the powder *you've* left behind!' He lifted her to her feet and briefly kissed her hair. 'You don't look a bit well to-night; do you feel well?'

'No. I'm shivery — I've got a headache.... Perhaps I shall be ill and die and then you'll be rid of me.' Her tears came freely now, unchecked, running down her cheeks as she turned to pick up her cloak.

'Oh, Flora, Flora,' he said miserably, pulling her into his arms. 'Don't behave like this — don't.... Come up to bed — I'll read you to sleep, if you like. And stay in bed to-morrow; you've probably got a chill.'

She clung to him, sobbing aloud like a child, and murmuring between gasping breaths — 'Oh, do love me, Martin — don't stop loving me...'

He picked her up presently, thinking drearily of the

last time he had carried her to her room, and took her upstairs. 'Get to bed, you poor little thing — you don't weigh more than a kitten — and then I'll come and read to you.... Stop crying, Flora dear, do please, please stop crying — I can't stand it.... Look, I'll help you out of this pretty frock before you spoil it with tears! Come now — how does it come off? — over your head? — oh, then you must do it yourself.... That's better. You're shivering; I'll light the fire. Just pull off your clothes and tumble into bed.'

He set a match to the fire, got into a dressing-gown and sat by her side, monotonously reading, till she fell asleep. It was five o'clock before he reached his own bed, and when he stood for a moment at the window he saw that the stars had gone and snow was falling again.

V

After spending the morning in her room, Flora went downstairs for lunch, shivered by the fire till tea-time, and then retired to bed again, with a violent headache, aching limbs, and a high temperature.

Martin said commiseratingly, as he snapped the thermometer back into its case, 'Influenza, I'm afraid, you poor old thing. I'll get Briton to come and have a look at you.'

'I shouldn't trouble him,' said Flora, who had not recovered from her mood of the early hours. 'Much better let me die quickly and leave you free.'

He remembered that she was feverish and must be treated leniently, and going to the bedside put a kindly hand on her hair. 'A lot of "freedom" I should have,

you absurd child, with your murder on my conscience! I'll go and ring up Briton now and come back in a moment, unless you feel you can sleep?'

Her head moved vaguely under his hand, but she said nothing, and he went down to the telephone.

Dr. Briton called before dinner and confirmed Martin's diagnosis. 'Only a slight attack,' he said as he pulled on his fur gloves in the hall. 'I'll look in in the morning. Good-night, Holme — tiresome, this snow, isn't it? There's more to come, I'm afraid.'

Lena Corry came the next day, bringing books and sympathy and the offer of reading aloud. In view of the small scene of the previous day, Martin thought it politic to keep out of his wife's room while her visitor was there; but Lena found him in the drawing-room when she came downstairs, and joined him by the fire. 'She's asleep, so I stopped reading. Poor Flora.... I hope you won't catch this wretched thing, Martin? — I never do.'

With his spirits reflecting Flora's depression, he answered, 'I don't think it would matter very much if I did.'

She gave him a quick little smile of admonishment tempered by understanding. And it struck him, not for the first time, how far more gentle she was to him now, when he secretly cared very little how she treated him, than when it had mattered a great deal. She had been in those days — ten years ago, while she was still in her teens — much less careful of his feelings, much more masterful, self-willed, provokingly perverse. He reflected with a touch of uneasy cynicism that the method of a self-confident possessor usually differs from that of an aspirant. But modesty and common sense

added — 'Yet, damn it all, how can she be "aspiring" where I'm concerned? ... Nobody could sit by like a vulture for one sort of chance, and Lena must know very well there's no other.' He ignored the fact that amorous aspiration need not aim solely at marriage; and concluded, 'I'm an idiot to suppose for an instant that she likes me again in that sort of way. It's all just friendliness — and perhaps a touch of mischief.'

Responding stiffly to her smile, he said, 'Are you thinking I'm displaying the first symptom of infection? I'm not. I'm perfectly well, except for being over-Christmased in the liver.... What's Mulberry Lodge doing to-day?'

'Oh — droning along in its usual fashion. I think Frank and Cicely were coming to tea.'

'That's a nice child,' he said. 'Is Roger likely to think so, too?'

Lena disappointed his faintly malicious intention. 'I never prophesy in the region of affection, my dear. The wind of attraction bloweth where it listeth.... I must be getting back; there are people to dinner.'

Making no attempt to detain her, he asked as he stood up, 'Don Juan?'

'Don — ? Oh, you mean Mr. Alfred. No, not this time. Uncle Peter doesn't encourage him much. He's had a good many years of him already, you see.'

'That's one good reason for dispensing with him, certainly.' Martin took her umbrella out of the stand. 'You'll want this, it's snowing a little.... Doesn't Alfred find enough encouragement without Uncle Peter's?'

'He finds all he needs, I dare say.'

That might mean, Martin thought, for his sensibility or his sentimental purpose. He said grimly as he opened

the hall door, 'There are a good many years *ahead* still, you know, to have too much of.'

She gave him her hand with a non-committal smile. 'Much and little are such comparative terms, aren't they? One doesn't measure likes and dislikes by time. ... I'll come again to-morrow, if you think Flora cares to have me.'

'I'm sure she does,' he assured her, with no conviction in his mind. 'Good-night — it was very good of you to come on such a beastly day.'

Flora, not sleeping just then, heard the click of the gate as Lena went away.

She heard it often during the three weeks that she lay upstairs. Lena came almost daily, and, though her visits began when Martin was not in the house, they generally extended to the time of his return; Flora, listening feverishly, would hear their voices in the hall. Martin sometimes made a third in his wife's room if he got home early, but more often Lena's departures seemed calculated to match his arrivals; and always, Flora miserably realised, that arrival delayed the visitor's going for a considerable time.

Flora's temperature had dropped after the first few days, but it refused to remain normal, and, though she was allowed to sit up for a little while every afternoon, she was still kept a prisoner in her own room. And lying listlessly in bed, weak and depressed, her mind occupied itself continually with speculation on the subject of Martin and Lena. This kindness of Lena's, these visits and books and readings, this determined friendliness — what did they all mean but a deliberate bid for Martin's affection — a time-worn device for reaching the husband through an alleged fondness for the wife?

Had Lena ever shown the least desire for friendship until the last month or so — till *after* her sudden access of interest in Martin himself, which had sprung into being during Flora's latest absence from Soames Green? ... How far, how far, Flora wretchedly wondered, was the interest mutual? How often might they not be meeting outside the house as well as in it? ... And visualising with a wounding clarity that small and haggard yet rounded face, the dragging and faintly husky voice, Flora would press her cheek into the pillow while tears slid under her lashes which she was too languid and sad to wipe away.

One Saturday afternoon, when she had just left her bed for an armchair by the fire, her sister came into the room with a big bunch of violets in her hand. 'These are for you, Flora. Aren't they pretty things? Martin told me to bring them to you.'

'Very pretty, Maggie. Where is Martin? — hasn't he come in?'

'I don't think so. Bates and I were coming down the High Street — Bates let me buy some peppermints at Doyle's — and Martin and Miss Corry caught us up and walked down to the corner with us. Then Martin gave me the money to buy these at Mrs. Westby's and told me to come quickly and put them in water. Shall I put them in this blue jug, Flora?'

'Yes, if you like ... Martin didn't choose them himself, then?'

'No. He pointed to them in the window and gave me a ten-shilling note and I gave him the right change without having to ask Bates. He stayed outside talking to Miss Corry. Look, Flora — isn't that pretty — that blue and purple?'

'Very pretty, Maggie.... What did Martin do after you came out of the shop?'

'He sent me home to put the flowers in water.'

'But what did he do himself? — Where did he go?

'He stopped at the corner of the road.'

'With Miss Corry?'

'With Miss Corry. She looked so nice, Flora; she had on a little dark brown hat with teeny, teeny orange-coloured feathers round the brim.'

Flora leant her cheek on her hand. 'Is she coming here to tea?'

'I don't know. She was talking a lot to Martin, but I didn't listen much. And *he* was saying something about a dinner in London.... Ought I to cut the stalks of these flowers, Flora? Will they die soon if I don't?'

'You can cut them to-morrow. What did Martin say about dinner in London?'

'I don't know. That's all I heard. I must go and have my tea now — Bates said I wasn't to stay and tire you. Have I tired you, Flora?'

'No. But go and have your tea.'

'Yes, I will. I'm hungry. Is your influenza better to-day?'

'I think so — I don't know.... Run along, Maggie.'

She sat with her cheek crushed into the cushion, staring at the fire under painfully wrinkled brows. Dinner in London.... Did that mean dinner with *her?*'

Martin came in presently and bent down to kiss her cheek. 'Better? You don't look very flourishing.'

'I feel wretched.' She shut her eyes, afraid to let him see the misery and reproach and suspicion that burnt under their lids. 'Aren't you rather late?'

He allowed for Maggie's communicativeness and risked no concealments. 'I met Lena coming out of Celian and Somerdew's and walked down with her. She kept me talking some time. Did you like your flowers?'

'Yes, thanks.... Maggie said you sent her in to get them.'

He sensed a rebuke, and defended with — 'I thought it would please her.'

'Didn't you bring Lena in to tea?'

'No. I dare say she'd have come, but I didn't ask her. I thought' — Martin hazarded with experimental lightness — 'I thought perhaps you'd had enough of Lena this week!'

Nervous of scaring him into evasions which might defeat her morbid desire for certainty, Flora answered with a careful elimination of displeasure from her tone, 'Oh, well, she's been very kind.'

'Yes — I didn't mean to be ungrateful. I merely imagined you might like a change. Shall I ask Briton if his sister would look you up one day, now there's not much risk of infection? She's a cheery young thing.'

'If you like.'

'But it's if you like!' He added unwisely, 'We're concerned with your visitors, not mine.'

She said nothing to that, and her silence struck him as rather ominous; but after a moment she asked, 'Is it too early for tea? I'm so thirsty.'

'I'll tell them to bring it. And we'll play picquet afterwards if you feel up to it. Do you think you do?' He touched her hair with his hand.

She moved her head agonisedly under that kind touch, not daring in her sick doubt of his sincerity to take comfort from it. 'I dare say I shall when I've had some tea.

You might ask them to bring it at *once*, Martin — Lizzie always hates getting it early.'

'Lizzie must suit her tastes to yours, then.' He removed his hand, a little hurt by that misread gesture of distaste, and went away.

VI

SOME days later, while Flora was still only fit to creep down to the drawing-room sofa for a few hours, Martin introduced the subject which since Saturday had been lurking, like a piece of grit, in her mind. 'Shall you feel equal,' he asked, 'to being left alone with Maggie for a whole evening soon?'

Suspicion flared up at once, making her heart throb. 'Why?'

'There's a dinner in Town next Tuesday I'd like to go to if I can. Should you mind?'

'What dinner? Who with?'

'Sampson's giving a dinner to the staff, past and present, who served in the War. I should meet a lot of old friends, so I should be sorry to miss it, if you think you can do without me. But of course if you don't I can stay at home.'

Flora was by nature no more selfish or exacting than most wives, and would ordinarily have said, 'Of course you must go.' But with that chance phrase of Maggie's still feeding her jealousy, she found it very hard to believe that the Accountants' Dinner was not put forward as a mere blind for his secret arrangement with Lena the previous week. And she answered sullenly, in pain rather than anger, 'Oh, go by all means. I don't want to keep you at home if you'd rather be somewhere else.'

'Now, Flora! Have I been out in the evening all the

time you've been ill, except once to Bridge at the Celians'? You can't, you know, accuse me of neglecting you much.'

'There's a difference between doing a thing and *wanting* to do it.'

Never being permitted, by his supersensitive conscience, to lose sight of that sad difference, he felt its truth too sharply for contradiction or argument. 'There may be; but you've got no proof, you see, that there is in this instance.'

'Only the proof of my intuition.'

'That's not to be relied on, I'm afraid. I don't mean yours, but anyone's. Come, Flora — don't let's squabble about side issues. Just tell me honestly if you don't feel well enough to be left, and if so I'll stay at home with quite a cheerful countenance! I shan't make a martyr of myself about it.'

Flora ruffled the pages of her book, keeping her eyes lowered. 'You can hardly dismiss what my intuition tells me as a *side issue*.... But perhaps you don't care what I think or know or feel.'

Because he was unable to tell her the exact truth, because she was ruthlessly probing into the one sore spot of his conscience, he found it difficult not to grow irritable. And picking up the evening paper again, he said rather acidly, 'Oh, well, if you're going to take it like this, we won't discuss it any more. I'll give up the dinner, and we'll sit bickering like idiots all the evening instead. That'll be much pleasanter for us both, of course.'

Tears rose in Flora's eyes. 'Please don't dream of giving up your dinner. I much prefer that alternative.'

The forlornness of her voice softened him at once.

'Flora dear, I'm sorry.' He drew his chair to the sofa and put a hand under her chin, turning her face towards him. 'Look at me, Flora.... I've made you unhappy. Poor little girl, I never mean to make you unhappy.' He stroked her cheek. 'Forgive me. You've been having a rotten time and I only make it worse by being disagreeable.... Let's forget all about it. I don't mind very much about the dinner — honestly — if it'll cheer you up to have me here.'

Dropping her eyes, in which moisture stood like dew on a flower, she answered with dejected mildness, 'It wouldn't cheer me really — not if you were missing enjoyment...' Her chin trembled as she pictured the form of that enjoyment. 'Truly, Martin — I'd rather you went to London.'

'That's nice and kind of you, then — after I've been so unpleasant. Though perhaps you'd want me more if I were pleasanter!... Anyhow, I accept your kindness — I've got to settle one way or other to-morrow; so I'll promise to go — and you'll probably be much better by then.'

He felt so utterly tired of the subject, so chafed by the constant need to subdue and control himself, that he hardly cared whether he went or stayed.

With a mind desperately ill at ease, a heart aching at the threatened loss of a love killed long ago by her own unconscious hand, the progress of Flora's physical recovery was not rapid; and on the day of Martin's dinner he could not deduce from her aspect the great improvement he had prophesied. He had come down early to change and catch the six-fifty train, and as he got out his dress-clothes he wondered for a moment if he

ought to stay at home, after all. But, reflecting that Flora no longer had any temperature to speak of and was chiefly suffering from the languor and depression which normally follow influenza, he decided that there was no real reason to change his mind.

He had no conception of the particular suspicion that was tormenting her and retarding recovery, even though he had realised since Christmas that she was uneasy about his attitude to Lena. If it had occurred to him that she was actually doubting his word about the dinner, it would have been easy enough to demonstrate her folly by asking Lena to spend the evening with her. But in his innocence he made matters worse; for while he tied his tie before Flora's looking-glass he suddenly suggested, with the best intentions, 'Look here, would you like me to call in at Mulberry Lodge or the Britons' on my way up and ask Phœbe Celian or Miss Briton to come and sit with you for a bit?'

Flora had been watching him miserably for some minutes, finding it almost impossible, as the time of his going rapidly approached, to resign herself finally to it and to the hours of wretchedness she must endure in his absence. But she received his plan for the alleviation of dulness without enthusiasm. 'Oh, I don't think so. ... And why not Lena rather than those two? I know her much better.'

Out of deference to her foolish fancies he had deliberately refrained from suggesting Lena. 'I thought the others were more likely to come. Miss Briton doesn't play Bridge, and Phœbe isn't keen, so I thought they'd have more leisure.'

Her mind pounced on the fact that he did not at once offer to ask Lena. She murmured discontentedly, 'I

see.... No, thank you — I don't want anybody — I don't want to be a nuisance to anyone.... What train are you coming home by?'

'I can't say for certain.' He had finished with his tie, and turned towards her buttoning his waistcoat. 'I'll catch the eleven-fifteen if I can, but it'll probably be the late one, I'm afraid. These entertainments are generally pretty lengthy. Anyhow, I'll look in to see if you're awake.'

'Yes. Please do, Martin.' She knew how morbidly greedy she would be for a sight of his face — to search in it for some surviving glow of his hours with Lena. And watching that face wistfully now, she said suddenly, her voice quivering, 'I suppose you really *must* go — ?'

He thought — 'Oh, good *Lord!*' — but answered with careful mildness, '"Must" is rather a relative term; but I certainly want to and it's late in the day to change my mind again. You're not so awfully ill now, Flora; if you were, of course I'd stay.' The pathetic whiteness of her face checked his rising irritation at this maddening resumption of the argument. 'Do you really ask me to stay?'

'No — oh, no — go!' she said, turning her face away. 'I don't want you.'

Martin suppressed a deep sigh of exasperation, and with patient and determined cheerfulness replied, 'Then I'll go where I am wanted.... Good-night, dear — in case you're asleep when I get back. I hope you will be.' He stooped to kiss her. For a moment she kept her cheek averted, and then, feeling his backward movement, caught his white-shirted sleeve. 'Wait — good-night. Kiss me...' She turned her troubled mouth to his.

A few minutes later the hall door banged and she heard his quick footsteps going down the quiet road. She thought forlornly, 'He hasn't gone by the meadows. Is he calling for her — openly — at the house?'

She had her dinner alone by the fire, disinclined for Maggie's insignificant chatter, and soon afterwards slipped out of her clothes and into bed, lying with her face to the wall, too desolate and sick at heart even to cry. Where were they, those two, in what pleasant seclusion, eating and drinking what delicate food and wines? ... It was a long time since she had visited the sort of place in which she pictured them intimately sitting — face to face across a little table narrow enough for their hands, lying innocently on the cloth, to touch for a moment unobserved. A long time; but she remembered it very well, could too vividly recall every little trifle of colour and sound and touch that gave to such shared dinners their special glamour and significance. And it was Lena who shared it all now with Martin ... Lena's eyes — hollow, intriguing, dark — that pledged him over the rim of a lifted glass, Lena's hand that lay quietly within reach of his touch....

She prayed for sleep to come and blot out that torturing vision, but her prayers were not answered. The uncertainty of the whole thing deepened her misery; if she could only *know* that they loved and wanted each other, she would be better able to decide on her own attitude towards the situation — if, indeed, the despair of knowledge should leave her with any power of decision, any desire but to lie with her face to the wall and weep.... The Celians must know where Lena was tonight; she could find out from them whether she had

remained at home. Or would they, knowing the truth, choose to keep it from her, partly for Lena's sake and partly for Martin's? All Soames Green might know the truth already, and still — smiling in their sleeves — leave her in ignorance. Everybody liked Martin; did anybody care for Martin's wife? Not two straws....

Dimly, far down in her soul, she caught a glimpse of a lurking shadow, a crouching spectre that might, pursued, have taken shape as her own responsibility for all her griefs. But she had too little moral courage for that devastating recognition of Self, and turned hurriedly away from the grey phantom with its lamp-lit eyes of truth, to moan with the pain of her thoughts of Lena.

The evening hours passed with intolerable slowness, interrupted only by Maggie's good-night visit and by Bates, who put her head in at ten o'clock to ask if Mrs. Holme wanted anything more. Flora, wanting so much, answered, without turning, 'Nothing, thank you; good-night, Bates.'

'Good-night, ma'am.... Shall I turn out your light? — there's another at your elbow, if you want it.'

Flora said, 'Turn it out, please.' Perhaps in total darkness sleep would come and tide her over the unbearable hours.

But she lay awake, without even a comforting drowsiness to blur her thoughts. And at last, as eleven o'clock drew near, the time when Martin might be getting into the earlier train, a plan formed itself in her mind. If Lena had been with him, they would return together; so if one crept up to the station, one could see for oneself whether he had lied.... But he might come by the last train — more likely to, since, granting Lena's presence, he would want to prolong the pleasure of it. That

would mean waiting for more than an hour.... Well, she could slip into the waiting-room; there would be no one there at that hour. Anything, any action, any physical discomfort, would be welcome by contrast with this intolerable suspense, with no certainty at the end of it — only a glimpse of Martin's face, blank but for what her imagination read into it, his unbetraying voice persisting in his lies.... Yes; that was the thing to do; she would wrap herself up well and creep out of the house and up to the station through the water-meadows. Nobody would be about at that hour on a cold night, and she could hover in shadow near the station exit till the train came. If *they* saw her, it wouldn't matter very much, for then she would know, and would be lifted by that knowledge into a region of power and disdain; they would be the ones then to stoop and cringe.... But if Martin were alone, after all, she must hide and stumble back through the meadows to reach home first. With his thin shoes he was sure to go through the town.

She turned over and switched on the bedside lamp to look at her watch. She must begin to get ready now; she could not walk fast. She got shakily out of bed and huddled on some clothes. She had no energy to put on very much; her big coat and scarf would keep her warm enough for the ten minutes' walk, and at the station she would be able to find shelter if there were any wind. Was there a wind? She paused in her slow preparations to listen. There seemed only an oppressive and sinister silence, no whisper of sound anywhere.... She went to the window and cautiously pushed it open. Her room, at the northwest corner of the house, looked out over a strip of lawn to the water-meadows. These were wrapped now in an unbroken darkness, except for one tiny speck of light in the distance, low down, like the lamp

of a ship riding the horizon of a dark and soundless sea. Above that thick sea the moonless sky was brilliant with stars. The silence on earth seemed to emphasise the immense silence of the sky, which brooded above her with an effect of intolerable indifference to her small concerns. She could hear now the north wind sighing very faintly in the trees of her garden. The whole world seemed utterly dead and empty and strange....

Yet up in London — at this moment, perhaps, if he meant to catch the last train — Martin might still be sitting in warmth and brightness under soft lights shining on silver and flowers and glass and the pretty sparkle of wines.... She remembered again, with a catch in her breath, the charm of such things. Martin had always been very generous with his money; the dinner would have been a good one, the wines carefully chosen. Flora forgot that the expenses incurred by herself in recent years had left him with very little margin for such extravagances now. It was a long time since he had treated even his wife to the pleasures she bitterly envisaged just then. But with the conviction of his present indulgence searing her heart, tears of self-pity rose in her eyes; she turned away from the window and put her coat and scarf over her inadequate clothes. She must start now, as her weak and trembling legs would carry her only very slowly along the uncertain meadow-path in the dark. She crept softly downstairs.

Outside the house the cold of that iron night seemed to pass into her soul, so that for a moment, trembling and anguished, she felt incapable of going on. But Lena's smiling face swam into the darkness before her, and, stumbling through the gate and down the short stretch of road, she turned into the meadow-path.

At her right hand, beyond a boundary fence, trees rose in an unbroken wall that blotted out the stars, but to the north the black sea of the meadows flowed away under a sky that pressed upon her with terrifying force. In the absence of all light and sound, in her weakness and returning fever, the world and warmth and human friendship seemed utterly remote, permanently forfeited. And the tears not yet dry on her lashes brimmed over again.

She found it hard to keep to the invisible path and strayed often onto the grass, stumbling weakly over its unevenness. Her mind repeated mechanically, 'I must know — I must know — ' but with her increasing bodily distress the knowledge she pursued grew vague. She remembered that under the trees there were wooden benches at intervals, much used by lovers on summer nights, and she tried to find one for a moment's rest. But at the thin shriek of a train, a long way off, she thought desperately, 'I shall be late — ' and tried to struggle back to the path. She missed it, crossed it, and went stumbling along through the fields, till suddenly the sky, with all its stars, swept downwards in a foaming wave to meet the blackness of the earth.

VII

On the afternoon of that day Mr. Celian went into his drawing-room and found Phœbe sitting before the small grand piano with her hands folded in her lap.

'Where's your mother?' he asked. 'Isn't she at home?'

'She's out playing Bridge. Do you want tea?'

'It doesn't matter. Play to me, Phœbs.'

She obeyed for a time, playing agreeably, though without great art, and then moved to the hearth-rug and sat there crossed-legged near her father's knees.

'Sad?' he asked on impulse, seeing her face; and added, 'I'm afraid things aren't looking very happy to you just now, my child.'

'Oh...' She hesitated to accept the reopening of a topic never touched on between them since the night in September when he had found her crying by the field-gate. Things, in appearance, had changed so much since that relatively peaceful time that it was no longer easy to answer as simply and confidently as she had then.

To that indeterminate sound, which conveyed the sense of her silence, Mr. Celian — unexpectedly to himself and with very little reason — murmured, 'Don't despair, Phœbe... don't despair.'

She gave him the briefest smile and moved nearer to rest against his knees. 'No.... But one can't hope very much either, Guv'nor dear.'

Those words held two meanings for them both: that hope was in any case not to be honourably permitted, and that in the present case it could no longer reasonably be indulged in by her intelligence.

Her father made no direct comment, but, settling back into the hollow of his chair, he said meditatively in his dry tones, 'It's curious — and rather sad — to realise as one grows elderly that in spite of the enormous importance one person may attach to the proximity of another person at a given period, nobody is, in fact, really essential to anyone else. One may certainly be much happier for a particular person's existence and nearness while they exist and are near; but in having

to do without them — him or her — one's self is by no means destroyed.... The self is a strange and indestructible thing, so long as it breathes; as a whole, it's infinitely more independent and tough than any separate part.... Under every adverse condition, physical or spiritual, it seems somehow to survive; it feeds on life, whether life is palatable or otherwise. And the people who think least of themselves really contribute best to their ultimate comfort of soul, for they give the Self its most wholesome food.... All this, Phœbe, is rather a digression, but perhaps you gather the drift of what I'm trying to imply.'

'I think so. Counsels against despair!... What I really mind most is the prospect of getting through life — oh, quite pleasantly and sanely and usefully, I dare say — but without the certainty that what one wanted very much was ever really there to have, if circumstances had allowed.... That seems to me the real death — to have possessed nothing in *that* sense. It seems to me as if that kind of death — that poverty — leaves nothing behind. The self you've been talking of must very completely die.'

'I don't think that is so,' said Mr. Celian, who enjoyed nothing better than an abstract argument. 'To be very trite, it's not what you've *had* that you leave behind, but what you've given. And it's what you've given that you take on with you, too, if one goes on anywhere at all. ... And I think one has to believe that in a sense one is immortal. Even the body isn't perfectly perishable — some fine dust must escape always into the outer air and contribute to the birth of something, somewhere, sometime.... And ultimately, perhaps, the essence of oneself — not body or soul or spirit, but just a mote in a

straying sunbeam — may be allowed to look down on the earth and say with pride — " Perhaps my sore heart created the poppy in that field." '

Phœbe's arm pressed his knee. ' Has your heart ever been frightfully sore?'

' Not more than most people's — far less than some, poor souls.'

' Yes . . . but sore is sore, setting aside comparisons. . . . I think, anyhow, you'll sow very rich poppies in your field!'

He realised, with a sense of humility, in what freedom from real tragedy his life had passed; and he said deprecatingly, ' Oh, I don't know . . . I fancy my worst woes wouldn't paint more than a pale anemone! With certain exceptions my lines have fallen to me in pleasant places.'

The door opened and Lena came in. ' What a touching scene! Is this the children's hour? — am I in the way?'

' Not a bit,' said her uncle amiably. ' If it's the children's hour you're entitled to your share of the rug.'

' Am I?' She looked down at him with her inscrutable small smile. ' I've never been aware of the privilege. But at this moment, like an exemplary child, I'm going up to have my bath.'

Mr. Celian said, ' There are two very pleasant places in the world: one's bath and one's bed. I think lazy people of cleanly habits and ample means must be much happier than any others, for they possess every facility for those luxuries. Phœbe, I too must go and change. Would you kindly de-limpet yourself from my knee.'

Martin enjoyed his much-discussed dinner in London

that evening. It afforded him a complete and welcome change from the atmosphere — a little stuffy and monotonous and poisoned by conscience — which he had been breathing for a long time, and in the renewed association with men he had known and liked in his fighting days — men whom he had seen in danger, in pain, in anger and drink, but always in a sort of freedom from smallness and artificiality — he recovered some of his zest for living, his good spirits and interest in general topics, all of which had been slowly fretted out of him during the last few years. And to the enjoyment of this draught of fresher air was added the pleasure of meeting Dick Mellor, who had been his closest friend until the Armistice divided them by leaving nothing but a poor facility in correspondence to keep them in touch. Since the War, Mellor had developed lung trouble and spent most of his time abroad, trying to recover his health and to provide himself with a new source of income in journalism. Neither of these aims, Martin gathered, had so far met with complete success, and he learnt by degrees that his friend was much depressed both by the financial set-back to his prospects of marriage and his scruples as to whether he were justified in marrying even if his position improved.

It is not an invariable rule that a fellow-feeling makes men kind, for to some dispositions personal misfortune spells personal absorption and impatience with other people's woes. But Martin, whose domestic trials had been intimately known to Mellor in earlier days, was by nature ready to enter into the troubles of his friends; and though he had now a moment of envy for a trouble that could at least be met in the open and comfortingly shared by its co-victim, he could put his own situation

on one side and give an undivided attention to the recital of Mellor's affairs.

He asked at last, 'What does the young woman say about it all?'

'She's willing to go on waiting — like a brick. But it's pretty unfair to let her do that if my infernal lung doesn't ever mean to work properly again. She's waited five years already.... I make enough money, most of the time, to keep us both in a struggling sort of fashion, but, even if I agreed to let her join in the struggle, there's still the other thing in the way. I've a particular horror of propagating this filthy germ to be a curse to someone else later on.'

'Don't propagate, then.'

'Just as unfair to Edith; and I'm against that sort of thing on principle. Scruples are the devil, you know, when it comes to getting what you want.... But that's enough of my problems — what about yours, Holme? How's everything?'

In the soothing presence of someone who knew just how disagreeable 'everything' might be, Martin could afford to relinquish the cautious reticence which, though constitutional up to a point, had lately grown the more irksome with increased necessity. And he answered candidly, 'Pretty hellish.'

'M'm.... Doesn't the new house please?'

'Oh, enormously, in itself — if one had the chance to enjoy it properly.'

With the preventive of Mrs. Holme in his mind, Mellor could appreciate the probable flaws in perfect enjoyment. 'How's Flora?' he asked.

'She's been away.' That was enough indication, for Dick, of Flora's progress, and more essential than a

reference to her present convalescence. But Martin amplified gloomily with — 'God knows how long it's going on. There seems no end to it.'

Mellor said 'M'm' — again, sympathetically, and squirted more soda into his glass. 'Are you fond of each other still?'

'In a sort of way — I suppose.... One can't be anything but horribly sorry for her, up to a point... but it takes the gilt off pretty considerably.'

'Doesn't the gilt get transferred at all?'

'Transferred? — Ah, that's just it. It does.'

'In general or particular?'

'Oh, particular. I don't grin like a dog and run about the City.'

'Well... what about the particular?'

'Nothing. She *knows* — at least I believe she does — and there it ends. And must end,' Martin said stoically, much as Phœbe had once said to her father, 'There's nothing to be done.'

'You're too squeamish," said his friend, who, like many people, was ready to advocate a line of conduct he should not himself adopt. 'Why don't you take the cash in hand and waive the rest?'

Martin shook his head. 'Too much to waive and not enough cash to do it with. And there's no question of that, anyhow. It simply can't be done. She understands that well enough, I'm pretty sure.... No; one must just hang on.... There are things one can be interested in, of course; I'm keen on golf still, and dancing and music; and there's a very jolly old garden at the End House — I like pottering about there, digging things up and putting 'em in... and I do a little carpentering,

and there are books, thank God. I must just stick to all those and let the other slide.'

'Into someone else's arms,' Dick reminded him brutally. 'You can't expect her to stick to those things, by proxy, if she's young.'

'I don't. She is young — and I'm prepared for it all the time. But I fancy she's a sticker herself. For her sake I wish she weren't,' said Martin, trying to believe he did wish it. 'Sometimes I feel I'd better sell up and clear out altogether.'

'Ah, she's on the spot, is she? That does make even a minor cash-grabbing more difficult. Distance lends concealment to the view.... Well, Martin, I must go. I've got to get down to a sister-in-law on Richmond Hill — I sleep in a sort of roof-garden there for the sake of my blasted disease. I oughtn't to be in England at all just now, but I should have missed a chance if I hadn't come. I'm off to Pisa next week, but I'll look you up at the office one day first, and we'll dine.... Can I give you a lift to Waterloo?'

'No, you thriftless devil, it's not my direction. Good-bye — I shan't leave just yet.'

He stayed on, revelling in his recaptured sense of space and freedom, till it was time to catch the last train.

VIII

For a time his mind dwelt pleasurably on the evening just past, but as he neared Soames Green his thoughts reverted, with an immediate droop of spirits, to the problems that awaited him there. And suddenly, confronting them from a new angle, in the clearer light of his

renewed contact with outside interests, he saw himself as an ignoble and vacillating figure whom Phœbe would do well to despise. He saw, with shame and remorse, that he had exposed her to a pain from which, among inevitable pains, he should carefully have guarded her. After Flora, who had the first claim on his duty, Phœbe's claims were paramount, and consideration for Lena must come a long way behind. In his divided duties, Lena if anyone, must go to the wall, even though he hated to fail in response to anyone who seemed to stand in need of special friendliness. She had chosen long ago to dispense with his permanent guardianship, and thereby forfeited her claim; so whatever her recent attitude might mean — and her image as usual stirred him to a puzzled uneasiness — he should meet it in future with a much more temperate and careful cordiality. He must never again risk for an instant the calamity of Phœbe's believing herself ousted from his complete and steady love. And, with a heart and senses a little inflamed by the exhilaration of his evening, he determined that some word or look or touch should as soon as possible assure her of his unchanged feeling. He wished it were not so late at night, so that an opportunity might present itself without delay.

In prompt answer to that desire, the porter at Soames Green told him — ' 'You'll find the town lively to-night, sir. Burton's warehouse is afire and all the folks looking on.'

Martin's heart jumped. ' Poor Burton,' he said hypocritically, blessing the catastrophe for its chance of a meeting with Phœbe. ' I hope he's well insured.'

He hurried cheerfully down the Station Road, and to his satisfaction met Phœbe's father at the High Street

corner. Mr. Celian, leaving Roger and Cicely to watch the engines at work, was on his way to rejoin Phœbe and Lena on the tow-path, which offered the best view and more freedom from the crowd. 'It's infernally cold,' he added, shrugging his coat up to his ears. 'We shall all have chills to-morrow, I suppose, but I couldn't keep anyone at home — except my poor wife, whom I left nobly resuscitating the kitchen fire and preparing Thermos flasks against the family's return. The staff deserted to see the fun. You'll come and look on for a bit, Martin?'

Martin said temperately he thought he would, and they turned down a side-alley leading to the tow-path and emerged behind the small crowd on the canal banks.

Martin saw Phœbe at once, outlined against the fiery glow reflected in the water. She turned at his greeting, her face pink from the flames, a little spot of red in the pupils of her eyes. 'You've missed the best part,' she said. 'It's been so beautiful, but they're getting it under now.'

'If I'd known this was happening, I'd have caught the earlier train.'

He hoped she would understand that he referred to their unexpected meeting rather than the fire, but remembered regretfully that his actions during the past miserable weeks could hardly have taught her to jump to such a conclusion. He realised also that his own face, turned towards her, must be in shadow, so that she could not have read any message in his eyes. And, a little dashed, he stood silent; to be further disquieted a moment later by observing in her a movement, deliberate or unconscious, away from him. But at least it gave him an open-

ing of a sort, and taking her by the arm, he said abruptly, 'Don't stand so near the canal; you can see just as well from here.'

She obeyed submissively, in silence and without looking at him; and immediately his spirits rose again, for he chose to interpret that silence and submission as symptoms of a very acute consciousness of his desires, whatever her movement away might imply. He kept his hand on her arm, hoping that the force of his emotion might reach her through that touch; but the thick fur sleeve was not a good medium for anything more subtle than a crude pressure, and that was not the sort of method he cared to employ. So his fingers slid away from the unresponsive fur, and he continued his silent gazing up at the dancing flames, which, in his concentration on the figure at his side, he barely saw.

But Phœbe, glancing at him very cautiously, found in his face, lighted by those flames, a reckless and happy determination she had never seen there before. And instantly connecting it — in that intuitive quickness of love, which may yet be so quick to misread — with his altered manner and touch on her arm, she shivered with mingled pleasure and alarm.

He turned his head at once. 'Phœbe, you're cold. You ought to go in.'

She found herself smiling in secret happy derision, the blood running warmly through her body with love for him. 'Cold! I'm gloriously warm.'

Confused and enchanted, more assured than ever of her response, he stared down at her without speech; and at that moment a portion of the warehouse roof fell in, sending a little cloud of dust and smoke into the flame-brightened air. Mr. Celian, who had been stand-

ing with Lena and Dr. Briton a little way off, came to his daughter's side.

'This affair's ending, literally, in smoke. I think we'd better get home. Do you very much want to stay, Phœbs?'

Phœbe would thankfully have stood by Martin's side throughout the whole of that perishing night; but common sense and a not unpleasurable fear of her own emotions made her answer, unconsciously sighing, 'No, I'm quite ready to go.'

'That's a wise woman. Martin, are you for a hot drink?'

Martin was for anything in the world that kept him with Phœbe a little longer, and accepted gratefully. Dr. Briton, having extended a similar invitation to Roger at his own house, went in search of him and Cicely, and Lena joined the other three. Following her uncle and Phœbe at Martin's side, she asked softly, 'Well, my dear — have you had a nice time?'

The earlier part of that evening had already sunk into insignificance in his mind, and smiling inwardly, hugging to himself the warm happiness of the last few minutes, he answered with fervour, 'Extremely nice.'

Lena glanced up at him in the darkness, and realising the exuberance of his tone, he thought, 'I must be careful. She's so damnably observant.'

With his eyes hungrily following the dimly seen figure ahead, he found it very hard, nevertheless, to give adequate attention to her further speech, till presently she asked — 'Is Flora better to-night?'

Martin's conscience pricked him sharply, for Flora had not entered his head since he reached Soames Green.

'She seemed rather down in the mouth when I left

her; but she's really much better,' he said. 'There's very little temperature now.... I hope you'll look her up again soon.' It seemed hardly to matter now how often she went to the End House. Could Flora seriously imagine in future that he cared whether Lena was there or not? Surely some subtle change of atmosphere from the recent one of misery and embarrassment must make itself felt, even by Flora, who was not over-sensitive to such things, and convince her that any jealous suspicions of Lena were entirely out of place.... Yet he must guard very carefully against her guessing the real truth.

They reached Mulberry Lodge then, and Phœbe led the way to the kitchen, where the fire was burning cheerfully and a tray with cups and saucers stood ready on the orange-and-brown checked tablecloth. The room looked very serene and homely in the firelight, which sent shadows leaping up the walls, and the light of a green-shaded lamp hung low over the table and the tray and Rhodes's big workbasket brimming with coloured wools. Striped curtains were drawn back from the wide window, and its dark panes reflected the green shade and the fire. The floor was covered with tiled linoleum, and a big chair with patchwork cushions was drawn up to the hearth, where a large Persian cat was stretched like a little tiger, thrusting its claws ecstatically in and out of the woolly rug.

Martin thought how happy he could be as a humble labourer with such a home to return to after his work and such a wife as Phœbe to welcome him and share the long winter evenings. How little they would need of luxury, with such richness of companionship....

Lena, incompletely dressed under her fur coat, went upstairs to change it for a dressing-gown, and Martin

hoped that Mr. Celian would go immediately in search of the promised whisky, so leaving him with Phœbe to a moment's solitude.

But Mr. Celian, more sensitive to atmosphere than Mrs. Holme, deliberately waited for his niece to return. He was fully aware of Martin's mood, and, though one part of him guiltily welcomed the reappearance of signs that must promote in his daughter at least a dubious kind of happiness, he felt it kinder to both young people to give them just then no opportunity for a slackening of the admirable control they had so long laid upon themselves. Even a few minutes of solitude at two in the morning might, in his present mood, be a little too much for the Spartanism of a man whom he knew to be human enough under his quiet exterior. Even the best type of love is not exempt from mundane influences, and, although Mr. Celian fully sympathised with the impulse of declaration he read in Martin's vitalised glance — and ached with the knowledge of Phœbe's responsiveness — the spiritual side of his romanticism deprecated any flaw in the romantic abstention they had so far maintained. And he thought, with pride, that Phœbe shared his intuitive powers. '*She* doesn't need words. She knows well enough already that things are happy for her again — or as happy as they have a chance to be, poor little sweeting . . .'

He lingered, therefore, till Lena came down again, warming his chilled hands and amiably discussing the night's entertainment. He was sorry that Martin should be mildly hating him for a time, but felt confident that in cooler blood he would be grateful for a tactlessness which had kept his ideal unhurt.

Obscurely conscious, under his irritation, of that

preservation, though not yet cool enough to be grateful, Martin tried to resign himself with a good grace to the loss of opportunity; and with a warm and thankful heart he realised that so far as conveying messages was concerned no opportunity was required. Phœbe might remain puzzled by his recent behaviour, some soreness of spirit might still be left behind; but he was satisfied that she was at least happily assured that the bewildering cloud had passed and that she might now be as serene as their circumstances allowed. And, like Mr. Celian, he thought proudly, 'This beloved child doesn't need to be told things. She's taken me on trust again.'

Absorbed as these two were in each other, occupied in careful refraining from the intimate glances their eyes ached to exchange, conversation with the superfluous Lena was not easy to maintain; and Phœbe, usually adept at tranquil concealment of her emotions, was reduced now to an affectation of extreme sleepiness to cover her social deficiencies.

Lena, wrapped in her tawny-tinted dressing-gown, sat on the edge of the kitchen table, gently swinging her legs, her amber cigarette-holder tilted with more than ordinary jauntiness from the corner of her mouth. If her powers of observation, which Martin dreaded, were being fruitfully exercised that evening, she betrayed no suggestion of it, and her drawling comments held no less than usual the effect of dismissing the importance of Phœbe's presence and assuming a similar indifference on Martin's side. The attitude was one which latterly had sometimes hurt and irritated Phœbe almost beyond endurance; but to-night, bulwarked by her certainty of Martin's renewed allegiance, it had no sting, and, an unwontedly combative spirit awake in

her, she derived a human pleasure from the thought that Lena — apparently so self-assured, so confident of superior attraction, so exclusively bent on her own secret purpose, whatever that might be — was for once entirely out of her reckoning and for once making something of a fool of herself.

But Phœbe was not ungenerous, and she cherished the dignity of her sex even in unacknowledged rivalry, so that her amusement was marred by the fear that Martin might be sharing it. She could very privately enjoy having the laugh of Lena on this rare occasion, but loyalty to that dignity inspired a regret that Lena might be exposed also to Martin's secret ridicule. And she wished at last that he would go, and so end a scene which began to offend her fastidious taste.

Mr. Celian had brought Martin's drink and retired to bed some time before, so no interruption could be looked for till Roger's return. Phœbe, therefore, increased the frequency of her yawns in the hope that Martin would either believe in her fatigue or take it as a hint to move; though her contradictory reluctance to part from him prevented her from taking the initiative herself. But Martin still cherished a hope that Lena would grow bored with his unresponsiveness and leave him alone with her cousin. So, protracting his drink, he lingered still, ignoring Phœbe's prodigious yawns and trying to believe they were aimed at Lena rather than him.

Lena's almost unsupported efforts at conversation faded at last into a silence emphasised by the slow dropping of coals and the purring of the cat on the rug. But into that silence, above those quiet and comfortable sounds, there intruded presently another small noise that

puzzled Phœbe's ears; a slow, faint, dragging sound that drew hesitatingly near. And while, frowning perplexedly, she tried to adjust her preoccupied mind to the consideration of this new sound, there came a fluttering tap at the window-pane.

Upon the minds of those three in the kitchen, so lost in the mazes of their own concerns, the interruption had an effect of unreality; and for a moment no one moved. Then the faint tapping came again, and their heads twisted sharply towards the window.

Beyond it, confused by the reflections of lamp and fire, they saw a face peering in, a hand fluttering, like a moth, against the glass.

Startled and vaguely oppressed, they sat still; then Martin jumped up, knocking his tumbler onto the floor with a little crash. 'Good Lord, it's *Flora!*' he blankly exclaimed.

Lena, surprisingly, emitted a small dry laugh.

IX

In Phœbe's mind, while she helped Martin with the fastenings of the back door, that incongruous laugh registered itself with an effect or significance which she had no leisure to interpret. She dimly felt it to be a key to something missing in her conception of Lena, something essential to true comprehension. But she was more practically concerned with the problem of Flora's arrival; and though she was alone with Martin at last, though their fingers touched in fumbling with bolts and chains, she was hardly sensible of the contact.

They brought Flora, trailing weakly between them, into the kitchen and set her in the high chair by the fire. Phœbe said, 'Find some brandy, Lena — she's

half-fainting.... And get her into my coat, Martin; hers is soaking wet.'

The brandy brought a little colour back to Flora's lips, and she opened her eyes. Staring at Martin, she asked with feeble fretfulness, 'Why are you here? — why are you here?'

'Never mind about me — what on earth's happened to *you?* Why are you wandering about like this?'

'I fainted in Sefton's field. Then I saw the gate and crept in.... and then I saw this light.'

Martin said in amazement, 'But — *Sefton's field,* Flora — ? What took you out of bed to Sefton's field?'

She moved her head impatiently. 'It's on the way to the station.'

'But what in God's name were you going to the station for? I left you safe in bed.'

'I know you *thought* I was safe in bed!' said Flora, in weakly resentful triumph. Her eyes, bright now with returning fever, travelled a little wildly from face to face and focussed sharply on Lena, who sat once more on the table regarding her in detached and faintly sardonic curiosity.

Flora, staring back with hostility, stammered, 'I went to see — I expected to find... I thought you'd gone to London with *her*...'

In sudden pity for that revelation of jealous pain, and for Martin's exposure to it, Phœbe said at once, with an air of soothingly matter-of-fact surprise, 'Why, of course he wasn't with Lena! Lena's been here all the evening. We went out to see the fire and Martin only joined us on his way home.'

Flora's eyes, brilliant yet sombre, suddenly filled with tears, and she clutched Martin's hand. 'Martin,

Martin . . . I thought you'd lied to me — I thought you'd gone with her!'

'No, dear—no, dear. . . . Why should you think that?'

'You're always with her — always . . .'

In deep distress and embarrassment, troubled with a guilty sense of his complicated relations with all three women, Martin managed to reply, 'That's not true; you're dreaming, Flora . . . Lena and I are just friends.'

Phœbe interposed nervously — 'Flora, you ought to be in bed. Do come with me and I'll put you to bed.'

'No, no!' Flora pushed her aside, not taking her eyes off Martin's face. 'Just friends! You weren't always friends — only since I went away.' Her grip tightened on his hand. 'The truth, Martin — I want the truth . . . Aren't you in love with her?'

In the midst of his distress Martin seized thankfully on the chance to say, almost gaily, in Phœbe's hearing, 'Not the least bit in the world!'

'*Never?*'

Disconcerted, he hesitated, shrinking from a direct lie. But Lena suddenly spoke, in the low, husky voice which, for its charm, Flora so feared. 'Never since he met you, Flora. But if you want the whole truth and nothing but the truth, Martin and I are friends now because once upon a time we were engaged.'

Flora stared at her blankly, her under lip caught in her teeth; and in the moment's silence Phœbe's startled mind assimilated her cousin's statement. So *that* was it? . . . She could understand now a great deal that had so puzzled and wounded her. And a load lifted from her heart, bringing a wave of colour to her cheeks. She kept her eyes lowered, afraid of showing their sudden happiness. For if, being human, she could not enjoy

the idea of that past affection of Martin's, the fact that it was definitely past compensated for the minor ache. She had no thought of doubting his fervent disclaimer, and in the midst of her genuine concern for him and Flora — and some unexplained distress for Lena — her heart danced.

Flora, after her first stare of amazement, looked up at her husband. 'Is it true?'

His eyes went instinctively to Phœbe's face for a moment as he answered gently, 'It is true, Flora. Why should Lena invent it? ... We met in London years ago — when she was a mere child — and she promised to marry me and then changed her mind. There's no mystery about it, you foolish child.'

Clinging morbidly to a grievance which had caused her so much pain, Flora obstinately dismissed the alleged simplicity. 'No mystery? Then why did you never tell me? — and why did you come to Soames Green if it wasn't to be near her again?'

'I came because of the End House; you know that, Flora.' Martin took both her hands in his, speaking gently and reasonably, but conscious that his explanation was not made to her alone. 'You're distressing yourself so needlessly, dear.... I asked Lena if she'd mind my coming here, and she very sensibly didn't. Why should she? We'd forgotten all about each other by then.'

'But *lately* — ?' His wife's frowning, anxious feverish eyes searched his face. 'Until lately you've hardly ever spoken to her. Why have you changed? — *why* have you changed?'

Phœbe, hating for Martin this exposure and dissection of his intimate motives and affairs, moved forward

and knelt by Flora's chair, facing him across that limp yet challenging figure. 'Flora dear, you're not *fit* to be bothering your poor head about all this now. And can't you see you've been imagining things all wrong — doing Martin great injustice? ... Won't you let us take you upstairs and put you to bed? — you can't go home in this state. Do let us put you to bed here and make you all warm and dry and comfortable so that you can sleep. You poor shivering little thing.... Won't you come now? *Please* do.'

Flora's glance turned to her mistily, and, removing one hand from Martin's clasp, she laid it over Phœbe's on the arm of her chair. Phœbe and Martin realised painfully that she formed between them a most incongruous link. Lena, behind her mask of detachment, looked on with profoundly observant eyes.

Sighing tremulously, Flora murmured, 'Yes, I'll come. I'm so tired — so tired ...'

Phœbe released her hand and stood up, thankful for a chance of action after this intolerable argument. 'Can you carry her, Martin? I don't think she can manage the stairs.'

He thought of the many times he had — less gently and more miserably — been obliged to carry her before. He bent over her. 'Come along, my poor girl. Put your arms around my neck — so.... That's right. Now, Phœbe, will you show me the way — if you're really sure your mother won't mind?'

As they reached the door, Roger crossed the hall, saying, 'Hul-*lo!* What's up?'

'Go and fetch Christopher,' said Phœbe briefly. 'Flora's ill.'

He suppressed his curiosity and went out again.

Left alone in the kitchen, Lena sat very still, watching the diminished dance of shadows up the wall. The sleeve of her dressing-gown had fallen back from one arm, leaving it a little cold; and presently, roused by the physical sensation, she withdrew her eyes from the shadows and broodingly regarded the creamy whiteness of her bare arm.

She heard Roger return with the doctor and take him upstairs, and very soon he came down to the kitchen again. He was in excellent spirits, having thoroughly enjoyed his night's adventure with Cicely, and the fresh interest of Mrs. Holme's advent postponed his desire for sleep.

'What the devil's been happening?' he asked cheerfully, picking up Martin's overturned glass.

'Mrs. Holme is indisposed.'

'So I gathered. But what on earth's she doing *here?* I thought she was ill in bed.'

'She was. But she rose from her bed and walked; strolled on this balmy night to Sefton's field, and fainted there. She must have been lying in the wet for several hours, by the way, for she started out, she tells us, to meet the twelve-five.'

'She must have been a bit blotto,' Roger suggested candidly. 'Why did she want to meet the twelve-five?'

Lena lighted a cigarette and looked at him with recovered blandness through the smoke. 'Out of compliment to me, it seems.... She did me the honour of suspecting that her good husband had smuggled me up to Town.'

'*Oh,*' said Roger significantly. 'Well, I'm not struck all of a heap with surprise!' He looked shrewdly at his cousin, and added, with the confidence of complete re-

lease from her influence, 'Oh, Lena, you do give a lot of pain!'

Lena returned his half-bantering, half-reproachful gaze with her customary mocking self-assurance. 'I'm exempt from pain myself, of course! The villain of the piece never has any heart.... Which reminds me — supposing this villain had one, I suppose she ought to be breaking it over the transference of your young devotion across the canal.'

Roger reddened, but laughed without resentment. 'I dare say she ought.' He flicked her cheek with a finger. 'But I dare swear she doesn't! If you *have* got a heart, Lena, you keep it in an airtight compartment.... This room's getting chilly; I shall go to bed.'

'Go, little cousin.... Good-night — and happy dreams.'

He lingered by the door. 'You staying here till breakfast-time?'

'Possibly. I'm not sleepy — and my dreams don't beckon.'

'I'll leave you to your realities, then, whatever they are. Good-night.' He gave a large and contented yawn and went away.

X

Mr. Celian had frequent occasion during the following days to rebuke himself for certain callous thoughts that entered his mind and refused to be summarily dismissed. For with Mrs. Holme a compulsory guest in his house, too ill to be moved, with a day and night nurse in attendance and the word 'pneumonia' haunting his consciousness, it was not in him to suppress the thank-

ful conviction that happiness for his beloved Phœbe might after all be in store.

He eased his sore conscience with the reflection that for the sake of a man he greatly liked he was at liberty, without inhumanity, to hope for the release which Flora's death must in any circumstances prove; but it offended his sense of decency that Phœbe should be in such close proximity to an event that, conventionally to be deplored, would ultimately benefit herself. He divined, too, how distasteful the situation must be to her, since her own sense of decency might not at all times be proof against the human inclinations of her heart. To act against inclination is far easier than to compel one's mind to hope for the frustration of desire; and he judged how painfully Phœbe must now be torn between her wish to think and feel honourably and her natural longing for personal happiness.

She suffered, indeed, more than her schooled tranquillity of emotion had ever permitted before. And not the least part of her pain, as Mr. Celian guessed, was the fact that sometimes in the midst of it a stab of premonitory happiness assailed her heart, horrifying her with its significance. Yet she realised that, though it may be inhuman to wish someone to die, it may be unhuman to wish him to live. She had formerly had no unkinder thought of Flora than of pitying reproach for her spoiling of Martin's peace, and now more than ever she could feel the tragedy of that poor wasted and degraded life slipping away, leaving as much relief as regret behind. With no personal experience of tragedy, Phœbe had enough imagination to understand that the profoundest poignancy of some deaths may lie in their being so little to be deplored.

She seldom saw Martin, except at meal-times; for, though he was now sleeping in the house, he spent his days with his wife, avoiding contact with the family towards which he felt both obligation and obscure treachery. Pity for Flora flared up continually to make his kind heart ache, and he spared neither trouble nor expense in doing everything for her recovery that could be done. But though he had moments of sick remorse in which he prayed that she might be snatched back to life, to find in it — somehow — a little of the happiness she had forfeited, he knew that if she lived the chance of happiness would be remote; the whole miserable business would almost inevitably begin again, with the added awkwardness of her revealed jealousy to complicate his relations with Mulberry Lodge. And the inability to suppress occasional glimpses of a long-retarded happiness for himself made this time of suspense harder to endure, adding a sense of shame to his suffering which a less conscientious man might have escaped.

Rhodes said bluntly to Phœbe one morning, while she removed the crumbs from the breakfast-table, 'Is Mrs. 'Olme going to die?'

Phœbe's hurriedly conventional — 'Oh, I hope not, Rhodes' — failed in convincingness. For the old servant had decided that several good purposes might be served by the removal of a lady whom she regarded as an obstacle to her own young lady's happiness, and she was reluctant to contemplate the invalid's recovery, which seemed to Rhodes to serve no good purpose at all. So, sweeping her crumbs into a pattern on the oak tray, she pursued lugubriously, 'They do say nemoonia's fatal to them as 'as liked their glass.'

Phœbe found contradiction difficult, having heard the same rumour herself; but her state of mind at that time was such that mental honesty seemed an indecency rather than a duty, so she could only reply, 'We must hope that isn't always the case.'

'H'm . . .' said Rhodes, and sniffed with significance.

Phœbe shook her head reprovingly. 'Now, *Rhodes!*'

The shadow of a smile creased the old woman's stout cheek. 'I'm not saying anything at all, Miss Phœbe. . . . But I do say there's always two sides to a calamity, and I've always 'ad the luck meself to see the t'other side.' She bore her crumbs away with a conviction of having scored.

In the early hours of the following morning, when the wind was crying dismally about the walls of Mulberry Lodge, Flora Holme's feeble struggle for life came to an end. The small thin body, which had imprisoned her restless spirit for thirty years, lay still at last, immediately very secret and profound, under the high canopy of the old-fashioned spare-room bed.

Left alone with her, Martin stood for a time looking down at her coldly tranquillised face, and then knelt by the bed and laid his cheek on her hand, which presently grew wet with his slow tears. For among his confused and aching thoughts he knew that at the bottom of his heart he did not wish her alive again, and the partial shame and entire pity of that knowledge added great bitterness to his sadness. He felt an exaggerated remorse for every small harshness that — much goaded — he had ever shown her, and for giving her pain by his apparent interest in Lena, involuntary as that had been; but his tears were most of all for the irremediable failure of their life together, in which all his honest efforts

had been thrown away and negatived through his not having loved her enough. A high, constant, and patient love might have persuaded her out of her weakness; but though he had contrived patience of a sort — how admirable, he was not aware — the high and constant love had been beyond his sustaining. Flora herself, lying in this half-darkness, with an icy wind rattling the sash and sighing drearily under the eaves, was not more dead than that harassed love of his had long been.

Reproach for her lamentable share in their failure could find no place in his mind just then. And kneeling with his cheek against her hand, his spirit asked her spirit's forgiveness for taking back the intangible, incomprehensible gift that he had offered her eight years ago.

He went presently to the window and drew up the blind. The street below was still in darkness, the wind still cried along its solitudes; but beyond the canal the sky showed a bar of dull, bleak grey where the night was slowly lifting, and a faintly wrinkled grey smear, like the sloughed-off skin of a snake, lay along the surface of the water.

Soames Green ... Soames Green.... Ten years since he had first heard that name on the lips of Lena Corry; four since he had brought his wife to the End House; two years since Mulberry Lodge had become significant to him as the home of Phœbe Celian.... And in this house, which so incongruously contained the three women who in those ten years had successively possessed his heart, Flora had now reached the end of her difficult journey and found the solution of all pain. He hoped death meant that for her — that she was secure from all wounding memory of past miseries, indifferent to any sorrow or happiness that her death bequeathed.... Hap-

piness! He drew in his breath as the word throbbed in his mind; and shutting his eyes he tried to shut out all thought of anything or anybody but his wife. He owed her at least the tribute of undivided pity for a time.

An immense weariness suddenly overcame him, and returning to the bedside he sat down and laid his head on the pillow close to his wife's cheek. And instinctively he reached out and clasped her hand again, for his own comfort and for hers, in case her wandering spirit, a little lonely in its new freedom, still cared what was done to the body it had left behind.

CHAPTER FIVE

I

MULBERRY LODGE, restored to its normal ways after Mrs. Holme's funeral, seemed at first oddly quiet and empty, even though quietness was less needed now than before her death. The snow had all gone, the iron had left the brooding sky, and a thin February sunshine shone on the soaking trees and paths of the garden. And on the day that Martin called to say good-bye to the Celians, Phœbe found a snowdrop pushing its way up through the dark soil.

Stooping to peer into its small and wistful face, she reached out a finger and very gently touched the tiny cold petals. 'Rebirth,' she thought. 'After winter, rebirth...'

Martin stayed only long enough to thank Mrs. Celian for all her recent kindness, and to say good-bye. He intended joining his friend Mellor at Pisa, and then to wander by himself for a time, not returning to England for a month or more.

Holding his hand with affectionate sympathy between her plump palms, Mrs. Celian said earnestly, 'Indeed, you should stay away as long as possible. You look as if you needed a thorough rest and change — but don't go walking and climbing mountains and tiring yourself out again. You just sit in a chair in the sun and swallow all the fresh air you can. Though I'm told the air of Italian towns isn't always too fresh, by any means.'

Martin pressed her kindly clinging hands. 'I shan't

stay long in the towns — and it's exercise I want rather than a chair in the sun. I used to be a great walker as a boy, and I haven't had much time for it since. You'll get a trail of post-cards, as milestones of my wanderings. And when I get back, there ought to be a warmer sun than to-day's shining on Soames Green.... Good-bye, Mrs. Celian — I can't attempt to thank you properly. ... You've all been most frightfully good.'

He was relieved at being able to make all his farewells publicly, being nervous of what Lena might conceivably say to him in private and of what he might find himself saying to Phœbe. He shook their hands without speech, and to Peter Celian at the hall door he said only, 'I shall be back about the end of March, I suppose.... Good-bye, sir.' He had a suspicion that his late host knew well enough he would not be very reluctant to return.

Mr. Celian said, 'Good-bye, Martin. Take care of yourself.... Good-bye.'

After the younger man had gone up the garden steps and through the little gate onto the bridge, the master of Mulberry Lodge stood for some minutes in his doorway blinking up at the sky. White clouds were swimming slowly up from the south on a light wind that rustled in the branches of the mulberry-tree before the house, and between the clouds were patches of a delicate washed-out blue like the colour of an eye exhausted with tears. Mr. Celian, his heart warm with liking for the man who had just gone, thought contentedly, 'There'll be no more weeping for him, I suspect, one of these days; and none for Phœbe either, bless her — or, anyhow, never again for the same pain.... A certain kind of happiness makes up for a great deal, and I think that

kind of happiness will be hers. Martin Holme isn't any particular sort of hero, I dare say, but he'll probably give her quite half of what she wants, and that's no bad average in a disappointing world.'

He turned back into his house and met Phœbe in the hall. Putting her hand through his arm with a faint pressure that he read as—'Don't talk about him, please'—she said, 'There's a snowdrop coming up under the rowan-tree. Come and look at it before you go back to work.'

Alfred Somerdew had been absent from Soames Green for a little while immediately after Christmas, but during the last weeks his pursuit of Lena had been vigorously renewed; and Mr. Celian came to the conclusion that his one-time colleague, so versatile in the capacity for admiration, had actually come to at least a temporary pause at the feet of Lena's charms. Her uncle accordingly imagined that he would soon either move gaily onwards to other shrines, or disappear more abruptly, in a discomfiture guessed at rather than betrayed, as the result of being dismissed.

Mr. Celian felt refreshingly indifferent to either issue. The death of Flora Holme, although its abstract melancholy was not lost upon him, had lifted from his heart a weight of grieving apprehension on Phœbe's behalf; and behind a decorously sober and unbetraying front he experienced a rejuvenation of spirit which the minor problem of Lena failed to spoil. The problem had receded from the personal area. Phœbe, he felt assured, was safe from any danger now, and Roger, obviously most healthily enfranchised, was devoting himself openly to Cicely Briton. Even Frank Somerdew's sentimental

interest in Phœbe appeared to have paled without any warming in Lena's direction. This simultaneous recession of all three opportunities for the exercise of her special power woke in Mr. Celian — apart from his malicious satisfaction — an unwonted pity for the poor siren, so baulked of her prey. He could not grudge her any pallid compensation she might derive from the adherence of Mr. Alfred, little as he admired her for appreciating such a sop to her pride.

A change of weather late in February brought such a mildness into the air that Mr. Celian could readily believe the still bare trees would soon bear leaf and the borders of his garden spill over with colour again. Returning one day from the office by way of the plank-bridge, he dawdled to the house through his kitchen garden, with a thoughtfully contented eye on his fruit-trees and an order-loving stick poking at the weeds of the path. The soft air and the sunshine, still hardly warmer than a warm breath on his cheek, inspired in him one of his rare impulses to sing; but his voice being ill-adapted to the practice, he consoled himself with a cheerful whistle instead. And with his pursed lips producing a sound vaguely suggestive of an air from 'The Beggar's Opera,' he entered the drawing-room by its open window, hoping to find Phœbe within.

The room was empty; but almost immediately his wife appeared in the farther doorway, and upon her artless face, which achieved guile only for the benefit of her offspring, he read the evidence of news. Being word-perfect in that familiar book, he knew at once that the tidings roused in her no personal uneasiness but that of wondering how he would take them. Amy could never be perfectly pleased until she was sure he shared her

pleasure, and to-day he easily deduced from her expression that she was apprehensive of disapproval. He said resignedly, yet with no premonition of her answer, 'Well, Amy, what have you got to tell me that I shan't like to hear?'

Relief at having the way prepared shone from her telltale eyes. She met him in the middle of the room and took him by a coat-button, a trick she had when she wished to soothe or persuade. 'You're such a sharp old Peter,' she began, as wheedlingly as the innate candour of her tones allowed. 'I'm glad I never have secrets from you, for you'd guess them before I had time to tell a fib! And I dare say you've guessed this already — though of course it *isn't* a secret, and I was only waiting till you came in to tell you. In fact, I was looking out for you from the library window when I heard your step.'

'Well, my dear, I'm waiting to be told. I've guessed nothing this time — except that you think I shan't approve of your news. Let's have it.... You haven't lost that vicious temper of yours and given Rhodes notice, have you?'

'Oh, Peter, of *course* not! What should we all do without Rhodes, after twenty years? ... No, it's really nothing you ought to mind at all — you ought to be *pleased*, in fact, only you're such a funny dear in some ways, and you'll raise some tiresome objection —'

'Now, Amy, don't imitate Florence Briton! Tell me what all this is about.'

'Yes, darling, I'm trying to ...' She gave the coat-button a twist and brought out — 'Dear Lena's going to marry Alfred Somerdew.'

His mind was at first so startled that it refused to

register the full force of his dismay, and he answered in merely automatic incredulity — 'She's not *really* —?

'Yes, dear. She's just told us.' Mrs. Celian saw full comprehension slowly dawn in his face, and its healthy pink faded to the blank pallor of an anger she had rarely met in him. He disengaged himself from her unconfident grasp and moved sharply away.

She urged hurriedly, 'Now, darling, *don't* look like that! *Why* should you be so vexed?'

'Vexed! — That's not the word, Amy. I'm horrified — disgusted.... Amy, don't you *see* it's disgusting? — Lena and that lecherous-eyed old man.... It's simply nauseating...'

'But, Peter, why are you so prejudiced — he was your *partner!*' Amy piteously stammered, bringing to the aid of persuasion what was for her always the most cogent reason for tolerance.

'God help me, yes,' he agreed sombrely. 'You don't understand, Amy — you've no conception of what a man like Alfred really is.... You see a cheerful sort of old ass with a spurious air of benevolence and you think he must be kind-hearted and good.... He's *not* kind-hearted; he's selfish to the core, and he hasn't the foggiest notion of how to treat a decent girl or of what love means.... But it's no use trying to make you see. Your precious blinkers of innocence — !' He turned away with a faint groan, feeling vaguely in his waistcoat pockets, then went and leant his elbows on the mantelpiece, staring bitterly into the fire. 'Where is she?'

'She went up to her room.' Mrs. Celian stood still, her head twisted anxiously towards him, her fingers pulling at her handsome rings. 'Peter, you won't be disagreeable to her? — We ought to be kind and sym-

pathetic on a day when she must be feeling sad that she has no mother to be glad for her.'

'No mother in her *senses* could be glad for her! ... I beg your pardon, Amy; I didn't mean to be rude.... I'm upset, Amy — oh, much more than upset.... Don't mind what I say — You'd better leave me alone.' He groped distractedly for a cigarette and lighted it with a hand that shook.

Mrs. Celian drew nearer instead of farther away. 'I'm so grieved, darling, that you should feel like this about it — I've never *seen* you like this.... I knew you wouldn't be pleased, but I do think you exaggerate.... Lena isn't a child; she's twenty-eight and has plenty of sense — you've often said so yourself — and she couldn't make such a bad mistake about anybody. He *can't* be the wicked old man you make out.'

'I never said he was wicked, you dear innocent.... As to Lena's making a mistake — no, I credit her with doing this with her eyes very wide open.... That's what makes it hideous — that she should *know* and still choose to do such a thing.... Oh, Amy dear, *don't* try to argue with me, there's a good soul! Just leave me alone.... Kiss me before you go.'

She laid the smooth expanse of her cheek against his and he felt that it was damp. He kissed her hurriedly, conscious of one of those moments of intense exasperation which she sometimes occasioned, and trying dutifully to control it. 'Don't worry, dear — I didn't mean to make you unhappy. Don't think about it any more just now — I shan't be such an old bear in a little while.'

She frankly dried her eyes. 'D-do you want to see Lena, darling? — *Don't* see her just yet — you'll only say things you wish you hadn't.'

He laughed sourly and laid an arm about her waist, propelling her gently but firmly towards the door. 'That's a wise enough prophecy, anyhow! No, I won't see her yet. Let me have some dinner in the library and ask her to come to me there later on.'

II

He shut himself into that pleasant and friendly room and sat in his leather chair by the fire, staring bleakly in front of him. A picture of Lena swam at once into his mental vision in all her familiar delicate charm — the curved white forehead and hollowed eyes, the faintly haggard cheeks and secret red lips.... 'Snow-white and Rose-red.'... He had thought that of her once — on the very day when he had reluctantly counselled her to be more circumspect with Alfred Somerdew.... And the upshot was *this*... this offensive farce.... Oh, inconceivable that she should link her freshness and fastidiousness with that vulgarly sophisticated amateur Don Juan!... He had always suspected her of a capacity for some unspecified abnormality of motive and action, but never of anything which would spoil his conception of that very individual fastidiousness. A villain, he knew, may be fastidious, but his sense of that quality in her had nothing to do with morality in its widest term. He had never, in fact, imagined that such morality had much significance for her if her particular purpose involved its ignoring. But he had credited her — in a high degree, he recognised now — with a mental and physical shrinking from the special brand of inferiority for which old Alfred stood. If she were passionate and unprincipled, at least he had believed her physically epicurean. And now she chose to marry Alfred

Somerdew, with his lean red hands, his predatory eyes, and cold yet greedy mouth....

Mr. Celian was conscious that he was exaggerating his late partner's defects, but there was enough truth behind his prejudice to justify his abhorrence of Lena's choice, his sense of vicarious degradation at the idea of marriage between her and that most unspiritual imitation libertine. Had she herself, after all, such materialism that she could waive all drawbacks for the sake of the frocks and cars and gaiety he could provide her with? Or did she calculate coldly on being soon left in affluent widowhood? That would be a wildly rash gamble in the case of a man of Alfred's age and health. ... Mr. Celian's lips curved in bleak amusement at his own absurdity as he thought further, 'Or has my Lucrezia Borgia another solution prepared for him?'

He realised then how far his double prejudice was carrying him from the probabilities of this deplorable situation. A far more likely explanation was that she had genuinely coveted Martin Holme and was piqued and sore at his divined preference for Phœbe. Lena was entirely free, he knew — so far as he knew anything of her at all — from the materialism that sacrifices emotional satisfaction to mere luxury; she was not extravagant, though she cared to dress herself alluringly, and she was never to outward appearance restlessly craving for the accepted gaieties of life. From these points of view it was incredible that Alfred should make any vital appeal. Then what, in Heaven's name, drove her to such a decision? ... He could ask her, of course; but what chance was there of his receiving an honest reply? She would elude and mock him as always — 'I'm in love with him, Uncle Peter ...' No, by God, if she told

him *that*, he'd tell her she was a liar.... If she could appreciate Roger and Martin Holme, he couldn't believe in her attraction to Somerdew, even allowing for every possible diversity and perversity of human feeling....

The gong sounded for dinner and the parlour-maid brought in his tray. That Amy should abstain from a fussy personal supervision was a proof of her serious disturbance at his attitude to her news, and he felt remorseful for not having better controlled himself and reserved his bitterness for Lena — who would doubtless be indifferent to reproach.

He ate his food doggedly in an angry contempt for his want of appetite, and, after ringing for the tray to be removed, he drew his chair to the fire, lighted a cigar, and picked up a book, so that when Lena came he might not pay her the compliment of a too obvious absorption in her affairs.

She timed her arrival for the moment when his nerves were most on edge at her delay. And from the doorway, with the door gently closed behind her, she asked mildly, 'Did you want to see me, Uncle Peter?'

He said, 'Yes, Lena.... Come and sit down.'

She took the chair opposite him, laying her long hands tranquilly on its wide arms. She had sat there, he remembered, while he read her poems. That night they had seemed almost friends....

He leant forward and laid a log on the fire. 'Aunt Amy told me some very surprising news to-day.'

She filled his pause with — '*Is* it very surprising? I thought you must all have guessed what was happening.'

He said to himself, 'I don't believe you thought that' — and answered curtly, 'Well, I didn't.... I didn't dream it, Lena — it's astonished me beyond measure.'

'Oh, but surely' — she objected, with a temperate reasonableness that fed his rising anger — 'surely you must have had some idea? I've been with Alfred so much.'

He found nothing to say to that, suspecting her of a mere teasing prevarication. He regarded her in sombre silence, observing the tranquillity of her pose, the grave surface-deference of her deep gaze. And suddenly, against his intention, his disgusted irritation flared into speech. 'What in God's name have you done this for?'

She preserved her easy immobility, but her eyes changed. He fancied he saw in them a flicker of unexplained triumph. 'Dear Uncle Peter, I'm afraid you're displeased,' she said.

The tone of that unexceptionable answer struck him as grossly impertinent; but since he had no wish to play the heavy uncle, he ignored it and kept to the more personal issue. 'You're perfectly right — I am. Most displeased and most distressed and — ashamed.... Ashamed for you...'

'*For* me —?'

'*Of* you, if you prefer it. Or both.... You're doing a horrible thing, Lena, and I can't believe you're unaware how horrible it is. That's why I'm ashamed.'

Her hands moved slightly, loosened their clasp of the chair and tightened again. She asked softly, 'Did you expect better things of me, then?'

'Yes, I did.' He shut his book with a snap and tossed it onto a table. 'I thought you had refinement and delicacy and fastidiousness — poetry and romance and fire.... How, if I'm right, can you dream of marrying Alfred Somerdew?'

In the fifteen years since she had first come to his

house, he had never once reached any emotional intimacy with her. And under the sudden advent of it he saw, though she still controlled her eyes, a responsive quickening in the lift of her breast. She answered in her husky voice, lowered to suit their new relation, 'Why should you be right? — why should you have thought me all those things?'

He was silenced by sheer inability to explain precisely why. To suggest that her poems implied such qualities would be begging the question in his own mind, if not in hers.

'Surely,' that low voice pursued, quite steadily still, but charged with a force and significance that deeply disturbed him, 'surely you've really believed me cold and calculating — deceitful and treacherous and bad.... Haven't you, Uncle Peter?'

The uneasiness of his sensations increased; the character of this interview was acquiring a flavour he had by no means designed for it, and he felt himself on the defensive. It seemed to him, too, that he was speaking to a stranger with a long-familiar face. 'You're a many-sided person, Lena.... It's possible to have two sets of ideas about you.'

She agreed. 'Oh, yes — and for one of them to be wrong.'

Uncomfortably baffled, he echoed lamely, 'For one of them to be wrong, of course...'

He was silent so long after that, groping in the darkness of his ignorance of her, that she had time to recover some of her only partially lost serenity. And at last she spoke again, in the old deceptive tone of mild docility. 'Is there anything else you want to say?'

Under a threatened return of the artificial atmosphere

which habitually existed between them, he regretted the receding of a more intimate truth. He clutched at it with — 'Won't you be frank with me, Lena — for once? Won't you tell me why you've engaged yourself to Alfred?'

'Can one ever say precisely why one does anything?'

'Not always, I know.... But this is rather a large thing — it seems to demand rather large and definite motives. You're not the sort of young woman to act from idle caprice, you know.' He tried to smile at her for encouragement.

She smiled back, faintly malicious. 'In your view there's always the *arrière pensée*, isn't there?'

He refused to reopen that argument now. 'Well... mayn't I know this one, anyhow? I do feel there must be some very — cogent reason for your doing a thing that to the outsider seems pretty deplorably unnatural. ... I wish... I wish you could confide in me, Lena — ?'

Before that unaccustomed and unexpected appeal, her smile abruptly died, and she looked at him mutely from under drawn brows.

Mr. Celian persevered. 'I refuse to believe that you can be in love with Alfred. And you're not a person to put luxury before your emotions. I know that much about you, you see! ... Alfred's not a person, either, to be taken out of pity — he's remarkably pity-proof. So it can't be that. What is it? ...' Trying nervously to soothe her into friendliness and truth, he threw out at a venture, 'Is it just a desire to get away from Soames Green?'

She astonished him with a brief, 'Yes.'

'*Yes* — ? He stared at her, his cigar checked in mid-air. 'That's an extraordinarily inadequate motive, isn't

it? Do you hate the place so much? If so, you could surely have escaped less painfully for yourself.... And after all — why? You haven't always been so desperately anxious to get away. Haven't you' — he found himself slipping into insincerity in his wish to be kind — 'haven't you been happy with us here?'

She looked at him strangely. He felt that he met her gaze, released from secrecy, for the first time, and recognised more candour and more pain than he had ever surprised in her before. '*Happy!*' she echoed in her dragging voice, with a note of significant simplicity utterly new to him. 'Why, you've none of you ever loved me!'

Those words were heard by him with a sense of shock — the weight of some sudden charge of breaking a law, against which his mind desperately searched itself and found no defence. He was so profoundly startled, so immediately pitying and ashamed, that he could only stammer — 'You mustn't say that, Lena — you mustn't think it. It's not true.'

'It is true.' He saw a dark colour creeping into her familiar whiteness, staining it upwards to her hair, so that the firelight, which had sunk, seemed to have leapt up again and painted her face. 'Do you suppose I didn't know from the first? When I came here as a child — too wise, too wise for thirteen — from a house like my father's, shouldn't I have known the difference if anyone had loved me?'

Mr. Celian felt that he was listening to her in a troubled dream. The truth seemed to him now too lacerating to be faced, and he tried to fend it off. 'You were rather a difficult child, Lena — very unapproachable and reserved. You didn't seem to want anyone or anything.... But I think Aunt Amy always did her best;

you can't think she hasn't been fond of you . . . and surely Roger — ?'

'*Roger!*' Her tone dismissed the importance, for the child or the woman, of that affection. 'Besides, Roger doesn't really like what he knows of me; he was only a little in love with what he didn't know.'

Roger's father perceived the truth of that too clearly for denial. He hurried on apprehensively, feeling the tables humiliatingly turned, feeling himself the culprit before an immense and shameful indictment. 'Well, then . . . haven't you and Phœbe been pretty good friends?' His honesty compelled him to add, 'Till lately, anyhow.'

'Not friends. Phœbe's never been my friend. She's never cared for me. . . . And *you*' — Lena added abruptly, with a suppressed vehemence at once accusing and forlorn — 'what about *you?*'

Dismayed by that too far-reaching demand, he tried to turn it off with a deprecating little laugh of which he felt ashamed. 'Oh, I don't imagine, my dear Lena, that *my* feelings have ever been important to you!'

'*Not important — ?*' He saw her face suddenly distorted with emotion, saw her thin breast heave. 'Why, Uncle Peter, if you'd loved me, I should have *worshipped* you!'

That answer, with its immense revelation to his brain and conscience, affected him like a physical blinding of the eyes. And instinctively he shielded them with his hand. 'My dear child . . . my dear *child* . . .'

After a moment he heard her get up softly and go away.

III

In that illumination of his mind, where a hundred searchlights seemed to be directed with ruthless clarity upon every dark place in his memory of her, Mr. Celian experienced a sensation of slight physical sickness. That he, whose creed was charity and whose average impulse one of affection, should have so misread and failed a young human being given into his charge, filled him with the sharpest pangs of impotent regret. He remembered that small bereft child at her first coming to his house, with her dark unchildlike eyes too large for her thin face; he remembered that he had tried to ignore his dislike and contempt for her parents and to regard her as an individual to be judged on her individual merits — and then how her odd, cold, reserved manner had chilled his attempts at friendliness. Her darkness, her alien glance, and frigid yet assured young voice had repelled him by contrast with his fair and candid boy and girl; but he saw now that he had unconsciously exaggerated her effect of hostility as an excuse for abating his own advances. He hadn't liked her, in his heart, from the very beginning. The impression she conveyed, even then, tallied too well with his prejudice against the Corry stock, whose traits she inherited in such obviously large proportion; there was nothing in her, except good looks, of the Fanny Burton who had been Amy's sister and the least intelligent, least capable member of the Burton family.... He had always tried to be scupulously kind to Lena, for the fact that she was not his child, not even his own niece, made upon one of his calibre only the higher claim for a very just and gentle treatment. But there is an immeasurable difference between the deliberate movement of a conscience towards its duty, at what-

ever cost, and the divine rush of a heart towards giving, without any thought of cost at all. Mr. Celian's heart had received no such impulsion. He had not given Lena love, even in those first days; and surely any young creature was entitled to love until it gave proof to the contrary? Lena had given no definite proof; there had been nothing tangible to complain of in her behaviour. It was simply that her personality in general, while never allowing him to ignore or be quite indifferent to her, had prevented his offering or feeling a genuine affection.

Yet all the time, behind her small mask of independence of love, she had been morbidly hungering for *his*. ... He realised that with a painful lucidity now, not from her mere words — 'if you'd loved me, I should have worshipped you' — but from his hundred unwilling memories of past words and acts and enigmatic looks.... If he had deliberately raked his memory for these, they would have escaped him; but though he would far rather not have recalled them, far rather have been insensitive to the poignance of that *cri de cœur*, they came crowding into his mind, insistent and accusatory. In subtle and secret ways she had time after time made an unrecognised bid for his appreciation and love, though the pride and independence of her spirit had restrained her from comprehensible overtures. If he couldn't give — so he read her attitude — she didn't want. But she used, without indignity in her own eyes, every art to make them give....

Strange, sad little girl! With all her subtlety she had gone the wrong way to work, missing the simple fact that the way to him lay through others; no obedience and meekness to himself compensated for a lack of those towards the people he cared for. All her precocious in-

telligence hadn't taught her that, however clever she might be at drawing about her, like a flame, the moths she didn't need.

He remembered the poem of hers which had arrested his attention:

'Your heart ignored the gift. Your strange heart turned
From that rich offering, in which there burned
A flame of worshipping that might have been
Death to the creeping evil you had seen.'

He could no longer be blind to the personal application; and he thought wretchedly, 'Is that responsibility really mine? *Would* she have been different if I'd cared for her more...?'

He saw clearly enough that on her dark little mind and nature, mature in their immaturity, the withholding of the love she so particularly and innocently desired might have had very potent effects. In a child of thirteen, with a capacity for worship, no evil could have been ineradicable; but whatever evil already existed must have spread instead of being arrested. So his responsibility stood, even if both of them exaggerated it in emotional retrospect.

'*That lost child's heart still weeps... sick remembrance of a beauty slain...*' Those words, too, had stayed with him, and came into his mind now with a wounding significance. In her eyes, in her warped vision, that beauty had been killed by him.... '*Gropes for the perished good, and weeps again.*'... What pain, what pain the soul must have known that could create such a phrase out of its own experience! He realised that there can be no suffering equal to that of self-knowledge if the knowledge brings shame, and Lena must have known herself rather agonisingly well to have conceived

those verses. To have discerned in her own soul a capacity for good and to have seen it thwarted and overgrown! ... Undeniably the capacity for good must have existed, or there would have been no such honest, bitter discernment.

He stood up restlessly and clasped the edge of the high mantelpiece, leaning his forehead against his hands. That a human soul — a child's soul, with all its potentialities still waiting on life — should have been so drawn to his and have been repulsed — have known itself repulsed and never ceased to hunger ... this held for him a profound bitterness of compassion. And how could he forgive himself for the grievous harm his parsimony had conceivably caused? It had been in his power to mould this child's character as, by love, he had tried to mould the characters of his own children; and he had turned away, secretly curling his lip because the child was unapproachable and aloof and strange, and because he divined in her the 'creeping evil' which — instead of the beauty—he might have slain.... His mind could not evade the charge of responsibility; and it all sprang from the obstinate withholding of what was the simplest, most natural, most satisfying impulse of his own nature.... What hard, bleak, black spot in his heart had so insensitised it to Lena's forlorn demand? — *his* heart, which loved young things and could never love his own children enough? ...

He could never go back now, never make amends, for it was all past and the harm done. There could be no sentimental reconciliations; no tardy patching-up could heal that long-festering sore, and Lena would not be grateful for any compromise, any effort at an affection compounded of pity and remorse. She was too clear-

sighted and proud to find comfort in that. Her intelligence would divine the effort, even if she underestimated the searing of conscience that promoted it.

He thought she would probably feel strongly disinclined ever to see him again. There could be no ease or naturalness between them in future; and behind his pity and contrition and desire for reparation there smouldered still the truth that in spite of all these he did not really like her, even now....

The library door opened softly; and fearing and hoping that Lena had returned, he kept his face hidden on his hands. He would at least not cheat her of the sad triumph of knowing how deeply he was moved.

But it was Amy's hand that touched his arm, Amy's anxious and timid voice that asked — 'Oh, darling, what's the matter? — what have you done to her? ... She won't speak to me — she's gone to her room.... Peter, you haven't been unkind to her — you haven't persuaded the poor child to give up her marriage —?'

He said drearily, 'No, I don't think so. We left *that* problem unsolved.' Drawing her closer to him, he leant his cheek against her hair. 'Don't ask me questions, Amy; I'm unhappy....'

IV

Lena stayed upstairs for breakfast the next morning, to the relief of her uncle, who dreaded meeting her again. After a wakeful night he still could not decide what attitude to adopt; whether to behave as though nothing had happened, or to try unobtrusively to create for her a new atmosphere of affection. Yet how, if she persisted in her engagement, could he attempt even a show of

affection? Her personal revelation did not alter his view of that contract, but rather emphasised its gross unsuitability, and he was still determined against any encouragement of such a marriage. He could not forbid, but he would never withdraw his opposition; and surely if Lena really cared for him — most strange and disturbing thought — she would care for his approval of her actions. Ah, but she had said — '*If* you'd loved me . . .' The secret hostility that had always seemed to exist between them, even at her meekest and his most tolerant, doubtless derived from the conflict between her earlier instinct of love and her developed sense of injury. He could hardly suppose that thwarted instinct still survived.

It was a further relief when Amy telephoned during the morning to say that Mr. Somerdew wanted to carry Lena off that very day to visit his daughter in the North; she was busy packing and proposed to join Alfred at Wintlebourne by the eleven-fifteen. Did Peter mind —?

Peter hastily replied that he did not, that it was no affair of his, and that he was busy and must ring off. He shrank from discussing the subject. But he wondered whether the unnecessary deference to his wishes came from Amy or Lena. If he *had* minded would she have stayed at home? His interview with her had been so abruptly and painfully terminated, leaving the question of Alfred — shrunk into relative unimportance — so vague, that he had no idea whether she meant to attach any weight to his violent opposition. She had pointed out once that she had never refused him any personal request; but this retreat to the North suggested that she intended to abide by her present decision. He was too much oppressed by the larger disturbance to feel the

minor one for a time. It seemed a mere offshoot of his general culpability.

Frank Somerdew had greeted him that morning with an air of sheepish constraint, and Mr. Celian felt that he was both ashamed of his father and mortified that his partner should be involved in such a ridiculous affair. By tacit consent the subject was not touched on between them, and Mr. Celian was thankful that at least he should not be required to interview Alfred that day. Shirking lunch either at home or with Frank, he went to the Conservative Club with a client.

He was sitting sombrely in the office later on, trying to concentrate his mind on business matters, when someone knocked gently on his door.

He said, 'Come in,' with an absurd stirring of hope and fear that Lena had somehow returned to him. But the visitor was Cicely Briton. He tried to throw off the weight on his spirits in order to welcome her appropriately; and putting her into the chair opposite, looking at her vivid face under its close-fitting black hat, he asked kindly, 'What can I do for you, my dear?'

He saw a defiant courage in her eyes above the nervous red of her cheeks. With a lifted chin she answered bluntly, 'I want your permission to propose to your son!'

He was too much depressed to wish to smile. And he said flatly, 'Oh.... Won't he propose to you?'

'No.' Cicely's rare embarrassment slipped away from her like a little cloud from a summer sky, leaving her as fresh and clear. 'He's such a perfect donkey, you see!'

'I don't exactly see. What's the trouble? — what's Roger done?'

'Nothing. That *is* the trouble.... You see,' she re-

peated, resting her chin on her hands as she warmed to her task, 'Roger's rather young still — oh, *much* younger than I am, though he's actually two years older — and he has the usual young and absurd and romantic notions about things.' She paused, looking whimsically at Roger's father. 'Did you know, Mr. Celian, that your son was romantic?'

'I've sometimes suspected it, Cicely. It's a little surprising, isn't it, in the offspring of such practical and humdrum parents?'

'It doesn't surprise *me*,' she said cheerfully. 'I know perfectly well where he gets it from.'

Meeting her brilliant brown eyes, he felt abashed. Those eyes wrinkled into laughter. 'And so do *you*, dear Mr. Celian!'

He was conscious of blushing faintly. 'Then it's a secret we must keep between us, my dear Cicely.'

'Oh, I shan't give you away. Though it's not much of a secret. Roger and Phœbe know all about it, and I expect Lena does, too — she sees through most things.'

Mr. Celian felt himself embarrassingly exposed, and the reminder of Lena's perception pinched his heart. 'One can't keep one's failings from one's children,' he murmured deprecatingly. 'Well, what are these notions of Roger's that you find so absurd?'

'The usual hackneyed, conventional nonsense about my having more money than he has — plus the idiocy of worrying about his lost arm. Of course, I'd love him to have his poor arm for his own sake, but it doesn't make a ha'porth of difference to *me*.'

'Phœbe once said — rather charmingly — "its absence is a decoration." You, having your own romantic notions, probably feel that, too.'

'Yes, I do. But he doesn't. He told me once he felt like a jug with a broken handle.... Then about the money — if he hasn't got very much, isn't it just as well I can look after myself?'

'From a practical point of view, certainly. But his idea would doubtless be to look after you. It's a funny little prejudice men have, you see — old-fashioned, but it dies hard.'

Cicely said, with softened eyes, 'Of course, one likes him to feel like that, in one sense ... but not if it's going to be an obstacle to what one wants.'

'But all this,' Mr. Celian suggested, moving a paper-weight to and fro on his blotting-pad, 'rather suggests that Roger *has* asked you to marry him. I thought you said he hadn't.'

'He hasn't asked me; he's simply implied that he's not going to. So this is where I step in. I'm absolutely certain, mind you, that he wants it. Don't you think yourself, Mr. Celian, that he does?'

'I'm as certain as one can ever be in such things, my dear. I don't think your pride stands in any danger!'

'Then you *do* approve? — you do think it's the right thing for me to do?'

He gave her question a moment's thought, remembering that several prejudices die hard in young men's minds. Then he said, 'Yes, I do.... One can rely on Roger. He's rather a nice person, I think — if I'm permitted to say so.'

Cicely read his meaning — that Roger was too 'nice' for his love to be even unconsciously affected by her taking the initiative. She stood up and drew on her gloves. 'Then you definitely sanction this — this ill-bred, unladylike proceeding? You'll wish me luck?'

'Oh, most heartily,' he assured her, wishing he could feel less dreary and infuse greater heartiness into his tone. He stood up, too, and put a hand on her shoulder.

'Go in and win, my boy!'

She coloured brightly and laughed, but he saw tears suddenly suffuse her pretty eyes. 'I'm so grateful... I couldn't have faced it, somehow, without coming to you first.... I do love you, Mr. Celian — I do hope Roger'll let me be your daughter-in-law!'

He felt moved himself, but partly because her sweet and spontaneous 'I do love you' recalled the passion of Lena's — 'If you'd loved me, I should have *worshipped* you.' That speech, that voice, the sudden changed aspect of her face and personality, were things which seemed to be embedded, like thorns, in his memory....

He remembered Cicely's needs, and took her chin in his hand, saying, 'I couldn't ask for a dearer new daughter. I'm going to kiss her.'

'And look here, Cicely,' he added, pausing by the door, 'you can tell your backward young man that I'll stand him an extra hundred a year — that'll bring his income nearer yours and may induce him to accept you.'

She said, 'You darling!' — and they parted on a laugh.

But when he returned to his chair, in spite of his pleasure for Roger the momentarily lifted cloud of sadness for Lena came down on his mind again. And presently he thought, 'I understand why Christ cared most for sinners. He couldn't get them out of His heart.'

V

CICELY wasted no time. She was afraid; and like a wise soldier gave herself no chance to lose courage alto-

gether. She telephoned to Roger at his office that afternoon and asked him to catch the earliest possible train and come straight to her.

Roger, surprised and pleased and very unreluctant, asked, 'There's nothing wrong, is there?'

'Nothing at all,' she assured him hurriedly, and rang off.

He found her alone in the drawing-room in the half-darkness of the late afternoon. She had easily disposed of her mother by sending her to discuss Lena's engagement with Mrs. Celian.

Roger introduced the same subject almost at once. 'You've heard about my precious cousin, I suppose? Isn't it the *limit?*'

'She won't stick to it,' Cicely said, wishing that her face and hands would not feel cold and hot by turns.

'I don't see how she can — or ever thought she *could.*' Roger spoke gloomily, for, though he was entirely free from the obsession of Lena's fascination, he could not, on that first day of her engagement, escape a rather insistent memory of her slow, haunting kisses; and it went very sharply against the grain that these should now be assigned to such lips as Mr. Somerdew's. 'It seems a revolting thing to do,' he added, disgust patent in his voice. 'I believe the Guv-nor's so sick with her that they've quarrelled. My poor mother rang me up in a great state about it all. Lena's gone away without seeing him again.'

Cicely understood then what had caused the under-current of depression she had discerned beneath Mr. Celian's kindness that day. And with augmented gratitude to him, she said, 'Your darling Guv'nor... I think he's almost the nicest man in the world.'

Roger asked conveniently, 'Who's the lucky exception?' — and she jumped nervously at the opening. 'That's just what I wanted to talk to you about.'

Roger's heart stood still. It had come, then — the horrible moment he had always feared. She was engaged, after all.... He would have to congratulate her. ... His tongue felt like a piece of charred wood in his mouth as he managed to say, 'Oh, really? Talk away.' With a tremendous effort of generosity he added, 'You can tell me anything you like, you know.'

She clasped her hands rather desperately in her lap, thankful that the twilight must be blurring her face as his was blurred; and she hoped no sudden flame would leap up from the fire to illuminate her. 'I've felt that's true, Roger.... Otherwise I couldn't say what I'm going to say — to try to say, at least, for it's not at all easy now the moment's arrived...' Her breathless voice trailed off into a little gasping laugh.

Roger felt numb with despair. Yet a savage curiosity to know why she should be so nervous — the thought, 'It can't be *another* Somerdew?' — helped him to speak. 'Why shouldn't it be easy? Is there anything wrong with the man — ?' he broke off suddenly, for it occurred to him that consideration for his feelings might be what embarrassed her so much. 'Oh, my dear Cicely, don't worry about *me*.... Who is he? — do I know him?'

She astonished him by a little spurt of laughter. 'Not very well, I fancy!... Roger dear, I'm *not* trying to tell you I'm engaged.'

He was so immensely relieved that he felt his forehead grow damp. He said gruffly, 'Oh, I thought you were' — and picked up the poker to stir the fire while he collected his wits.

But Cicely caught his wrist, crying, 'No, no — don't do that!'

'Why on earth not? Surely I've known you more than seven years!' Surprise restored his balance and his cheerfulness. 'Coal running short?'

'No ... yes ... *no*, Roger. Put the poker down and listen to me.'

He obeyed, but changed his seat and sat by her on the sofa. 'I'm listening. What's it all about? — you're mystifying me.'

She wished he had stayed farther away. She had perfect faith in her conviction that he wished to marry her, but, as she put it absurdly to herself, she had so little experience in proposing.... Yet she had seen several men go through the ordeal on her account; and the certainty that her fate was going to be very different from theirs brought a sudden warmth to her heart and gave her courage. Turning her shadowed face to this friend of her childhood, she said soberly, 'Will you marry me, Roger?'

Amazement and delight kept him tongue-tied for a moment, and Cicely's swelling heart was shot with new fear. She moved her head stiffly and looked at the fire.

Roger said, 'Do you mean that, Cicely?'

'Yes.... I shouldn't ask it as a joke.'

'Not as a joke, no ... I know that, dear one.... But — just out of kindness?'

Her apprehension died. 'A sort of kindness ... but to myself.'

'Sweetheart, how can I marry you? I've got so little to offer — and only a beastly mutilated body.... It wouldn't be fair to you.'

Cicely said plaintively, 'You're such an *idiot*, Roger!

... Shan't I be mutilated all over if you won't take me?'

'Oh, Cicely — my dear sweet thing — !' His one arm went round her. 'Is that true — would you really feel that? ... Cicely, turn your face to me; lift it up so that I can look at you — you know I've only one hand.... Beloved, listen. You know I love you most frightfully. Do you honestly love me?'

'Honestly, Roger. How could you possibly think I didn't?'

'Some things' — said Roger, his voice oddly like his father's just then — 'are almost too good to be believed.'

'Not this one. Believe it, Roger — believe it, my dear. It's true.'

He gazed at her through the dusk in a very serious and emotional happiness, seeing her face full of curving shadows and soft gleams. 'If I had two hands, Cicely, I'd take your dear face between them and kiss and kiss and kiss your mouth.... Will you do it to me instead?'

He stayed for dinner, to receive the delighted congratulations of Mrs. Briton and her son, and later on took Cicely over to Mulberry Lodge. Phœbe and her mother were sitting silently together in the drawing-room, oppressed by the cloud that had hung over the house all day. Mr. Celian was alone in the library.

Roger said to his mother, 'Engagements are in the air, Mater dear. Cicely and I have caught the infection — condole with us, please.'

Dropping her book and her spectacles, the literal Mrs. Celian cried — 'But, darlings, I'm so *glad!*' — and had to dry her eyes when she had ecstatically kissed them both.

After everything had been appropriately discussed

and explained and reiterated a dozen times, Phœbe said, 'The Guv'nor's in the library, if you want to tell him now.'

'Oh, yes — do go to dear Peter,' Mrs. Celian urged, remembering her Peter's little failing, 'he doesn't like to be kept in the dark.'

They found him, to their surprise, sitting in actual darkness except for the firelight, but he switched on a lamp at his elbow at once. 'My eyes are tired,' he explained rather apologetically. 'Do you want me for Bridge?'

'No, sir,' said his son. 'We're not playing Bridge to-night.' He looked at Cicely and laughed. 'Cicely's made me promise to marry her!'

Mr. Celian pulled himself up from the depths of his chair. 'That's it, is it? Quick work, Cicely! — but I'm glad to see you take your fences like that. Come and kiss me again.'

Trying not to let his depression communicate itself to them and damp their pleasure, he said later on, 'I feel inclined to paraphrase Jane Austen's Mr. Bennet: "If anyone else wants to marry any of my family, let them come in, for I am quite at leisure." Lena yesterday, Roger to-day — who next? What about your brother, Cicely?'

'Nothing, I'm afraid — unless you can make Phœbe feel differently. He's never liked anybody but her.'

'He'd better strike while the iron's hot,' suggested Roger, who was cheerfully unaware of his sister's interest in Martin Holme. 'She'll like to be in the fashion.'

Cicely's eyes met Mr. Celian's amused regret. She knew how well he must understand that Christopher had no chance.

At the mute reminder of Phœbe and Martin, though it brought him a passing content for his daughter's future, Mr. Celian thought of Lena again, and his contentment faded. He was relieved when Roger and Cicely, with their almost galling air of complete happiness, left him alone. He loved them both, but felt incapable just then of responding adequately to their good spirits. He was too much shaken out of his ordinary serenity to feel very keenly any emotion beyond his unsubsiding distress and anger and anxiety on Lena's account.

When Roger finally parted from Cicely that night, he descended from her door to the tow-path and walked slowly northward in the starry darkness, past his father's garden and the plank-bridge, with its faint magpie gleam of black and white. He was feeling intensely happy and intensely humble; for he was luckily still too young to perceive any flaw in his circumstances or his sensations about them, and he wondered why Fortune should have been so miraculously kind to one who deserved so much less. His own financial and physical shortcomings certainly seemed to him a large flaw from Cicely's point of view, but, as she had swept them both contemptuously aside, he decided that he need not worry too much.... And of course the Guv'nor had made things less worrying by the promised addition to his income; very decent of him — very generous and understanding ... but then the Guv'nor could always be relied on when it came to a question of human emotions.

Yet in one such direction he was evidently completely at a loss, and Roger felt very sorry that he should be so vexed and perturbed by Lena's astounding action. Roger would have been more shocked himself if it had

not been for Cicely's domination over his mind just then. At one time, while Lena still had the power to make him suffer, he had in private gloomily anticipated such an issue to Mr. Somerdew's attentions, supposing that she failed to annex Martin Holme. But the prophecy had no roots in genuine belief, and, though he had lately decided that she was 'out of the running,' he had not seriously expected so definite a result of her chagrin. He could fully sympathise, therefore, with his father's distress without knowing its profounder cause. Walking by the canal, which gave back here and there, like a sleepily winking eye, the image of a star, Roger looked reminiscently at the water-meadows on the farther side. And he smiled faintly, in a youthful derision of the sentiment inspired by a superseded passion, as he recalled his sufferings at the thought of Lena and Martin wandering in those fields.... Could two emotions be more different, in essence, than his past feeling for Lena and his present one for Cicely? — that restless, superficial craving, and this deep, warm, solid happiness.... How strange that, capable of the second, he should so lately have experienced the first....

His thoughts swung back, on a wave of tenderness, to Cicely, and Lena faded from his mind.

VI

Lena and Mr. Somerdew stayed on in the North, and her dutifully regular letters to Mrs. Celian presently conveyed Alfred's wish for a very early wedding. Her aunt always showed these letters to Peter, though he rarely made any comment on their contents. He had persistently refused to discuss Lena's engagement, say-

ing, when she first attempted it, 'I hate it all, Amy. I'm not going to talk about it.... Lena knows what I think, and she must do as she likes. I won't discuss it.'

But in a letter that came towards the end of March Lena wrote again:

Alfred speaks of marriage after Easter, if that suits Mulberry Lodge. He says " at his age " he daren't face a long engagement. Well, I don't think it'll be a very long one. Give my love to everybody, please. ~~Will~~ Would after Easter suit Mulberry Lodge?

Your affectionate niece

LENA CORRY

Mrs. Celian, watching her husband while he read, said carefully, 'We must give some answer to that, Peter darling.... *Will* after Easter suit?'

He handed back the letter without meeting her eyes. 'Lena must please herself.'

His wife accepted that as a species of agreement, and went away — sighing in perplexity at his continued harshness — to answer Lena's letter. She wrote at great length that after Easter would suit Mulberry Lodge perfectly well, and then added with a wrinkled brow and halting pen — 'Your uncle makes no objection at all ...' Her pen, hating its equivocation, paused again while she thought — 'Yet that's really quite true' — and then wrote on, 'He said that of course you must please yourself. So you see, my dear, that's quite all right.'

She concluded with a kindly message to Alfred and to young Mr. and Mrs. Cheviot, and finished her letter. As she licked the flap of the envelope, she thought, in apology to her delicate conscience, 'I *can't* let her think

Peter won't discuss it at all. It would make the poor child unhappy.... How nasty this gum tastes. I must use the tiresome little thing dear Roger gave me for sticking on stamps.'

Mr. Celian, sitting drearily in his room, turned over a phrase of Lena's on the subject of her engagement: 'I don't think it will be a very long one.' What did she precisely mean by that? What made her think it? Was it a mere statement of fact in relation to the proposed early date of her marriage? ... And then — 'Would after Easter suit Mulberry Lodge.' What had made her scratch out the word 'Will' and substitute 'Would'? ...

Knowing Lena, he suddenly felt not very sure, after all, that her marriage with Alfred was going to take place.

He remembered, too, that for the first time she had changed the form of her conventional message of love. 'Give my love to everybody, please.' Always, since her engagement, she had avoided any direct reference to him, even collectively, by writing, 'With love ...' He wondered whether, in conjunction with the earlier phrase, and the altered word, the trifling change had any significance. It would be like Lena. Her methods were usually too subtle to comprehend, but it was just conceivable that she intended to let him know — if his own subtlety served him — that she meant to please him, after all, by breaking her contract with Alfred. She might feel, in that case, justified in including him in the 'everybody' of her message dispensing love.

He waited for her next letter in a state of restless and impatient hope.

A few mornings later, on the first Saturday in March, Frank Somerdew went off to join his family in Cumber-

land for the week-end. His departure left annoyance behind, for he forgot to supply the office with a much-needed item of information, and his vexed partner had to choose between depriving a clerk of his half-holiday and going through a large pile of documents himself. Characteristically, he let his staff go and carried the papers back to Mulberry Lodge.

He spent the afternoon with them, almost glad to have occupation for his uneasy mind, and after dinner, his search being still unrewarded, returned to the library. Phœbe looked in later on to see if she could help or if he would go with her into the garden for a little while, but he negatived both suggestions. So, Roger and Cicely having gone to a theatre in Town, she left her mother contentedly playing Patience, and went alone into the garden and down to the field gate.

There was no moon and no wind, and the stars seemed unusually large and fixed and benign. The air, after a spell of premature warmth, was full of the scents of spring; and, looking into the darkness that swallowed up the water-meadows, Phœbe could imagine their hidden greenness already patterned with wild flowers. She remembered standing at that gate, with a fine mist beading her hair, on the night that her father first spoke to her about Martin Holme. So long ago that seemed.... She had been both happy and unhappy that night, and looking towards the End House she had put her head down and cried. Now, though she was not unhappy any more, she could feel an impersonal sadness at thinking of the End House and of Flora, who was no longer there to ruffle its atmosphere of ancient calm. Did her poor ghost haunt it now, wistfully wandering from room to room, and re-living its old pains? Phœbe hoped not;

or, if Flora's spirit returned at all, she hoped it might be in new wisdom and gentleness, free of the suffering it had given and received.... If ever the End House became her own home, she felt she wouldn't want to drive that sort of spirit away.

Her own home!... Was that great happiness really waiting for her? Or would Martin, if he married her, want to live somewhere else? She felt she must try to persuade him not to move; the house so asked for happy people to live in it, and she could make him see that Flora's spirit wouldn't mind. Flora, if she was anywhere now, and not a mere speck drifting on the wind, would have grown wise and kind and would want Martin to be happy again. That was the best of death, if it didn't just annihilate one altogether; it must make people understand everything and not be jealous and small and selfish any more.... It would be very nice if one could make oneself, while still alive, as comprehending and large and fine as those dead people were. 'An angel on earth.' That was really what the phrase meant.... Phœbe smiled to think of her very imperfect self aspiring to be an angel on earth....

She had heard comforting rumours that Martin would be home soon, though nobody knew precisely when. Maggie Fielding and Bates were still at the End House, but Maggie missed her sister terribly, so Bates had told Rhodes, and such a lot of crying and mooning about the house was bad for her nerves. Bates hoped, Rhodes said, that Mr. Holme would manage to send her abroad. Dr. Briton thought it would be good for her. She would probably forget Flora very soon if she left Soames Green.

Someone was coming along the path leading through Sefton's field to the plank-bridge. Phœbe wondered if

it were Christopher, who sometimes came home that way from visiting a patient at Sefton's farm.

A man's shape detached itself from the darkness, turned towards her gate, and stopped. 'Oh — hullo, Phœbe!' said Martin Holme.

Phœbe's heart pounded against her crossed arms. 'Is that *you*, Martin? — I didn't know you were back.'

'I got down this evening. I'm on my way to Briton at this moment — Maggie seems to be in a wretched state.... How are you, Phœbe?'

She said breathlessly, 'Very well, thanks. How are you?'

He answered that he was well, that Italy had been beautiful and he had walked a great deal; and then they stood staring at each other across the gate, agitatingly conscious of the immeasurable difference between this banal exchange and all the things they really desired to say. But neither found a word to add till Phœbe asked desperately, 'Have you heard about Roger and Cicely? — and Lena?'

'Yes. Bates told me most of the news. I'm awfully glad about Roger.... What is there to say about Lena? — It seems to me a ghastly thing to do.'

Lena's name, which only her nerves had betrayed her into mentioning, increased Phœbe's embarrassment. She began slipping a ring up and down her finger, feverishly trying to think of something to say that would lead them away from that difficult topic. And in a moment the ring slipped too far and fell on the grass at their feet.

She murmured — 'Oh, I've dropped my ring... I mustn't lose it — the Guv'nor gave it to me!'

Martin lighted a match, found the ring in the grass,

and held it out to her, the flame still flickering in his curved hand. By its tiny illumination they saw each other's faces clearly for the first time, and could not withdraw their eyes. But the match went out again, and in the intensified darkness his fingers had to grope for hers. When he found them, the sudden contact went to his head, and, pressing the ring into her palm, he clasped his hand tightly over it. 'Phœbe dear, Phœbe dear . . .'

He leant on the gate then, with his face close to hers, folding her hand away into the warmth of his crossed arms; and hardly conscious of movement, obeying the long-controlled impulse of her heart, Phœbe laid her cheek against his.

She heard after a moment, in which they stood as still and silent as the quiet darkness about them, 'It's all right now, Phœbe, isn't it?'

'Yes . . . all right now.'

'But . . . not yet, my dear love — you know that, don't you? We shall have to wait again.'

The languor of an unimagined sense of peace was drifting over Phœbe's mind. Her lips moved slowly, 'I know. I'll wait.'

He drew her hand, with the ring still pressed into its palm, inside his coat and up against his heart. 'Are you happy, Phœbe?'

'*Happy — !*'

'Everything clear now — everything forgiven?'

'Everything. . . . Nothing to forgive.'

'Oh, but *yes!* I must have hurt you. I didn't mean to — I was hurting myself. . . . I was trying to keep away from you — trying *not* to hurt you. I was afraid of what I might do — afraid of spoiling something that

seemed beautiful. And I did it badly — clumsily.... I'm *so* sorry, Phœbe. You do understand, don't you?'

'Everything. Don't think of it any more. Nothing's spoilt.... I'm glad you kept it like that — even if I minded sometimes.... It makes it all much better now.'

He moved his lips to kiss her hair. '*Angel*...'

Phœbe smiled secretly, remembering 'an angel on earth.' There were moments, after all, when one could seem so, to a very prejudiced person; moments, such as this, when one could almost feel an angel, too — so full of happiness and profound love....

They said good-night at last; Martin went on to Briton's house, and Phœbe returned, slipping like a happy ghost between the trees of the garden, to Mulberry Lodge.

VII

Passing through the drawing-room, where her mother had fallen asleep over her cards, she went to the library again.

Mr. Celian was still immersed in his documents, the light of a reading-lamp shining on his grey hair and the healthy pink of his face.

Phœbe sat on the arm of his chair. 'Are you too busy to talk to me?'

Without looking up, he put an absently affectionate hand on her knee. 'Anything special?'

'Rather special, darling.... Martin's home; I've just seen him.'

The tone of her voice, its enriched emotional quality,

arrested his attention at once; and, sliding his spectacles down his nose, he looked round at her above them. 'Oho! ... What's he been saying to you to make you look so sweet?'

'He didn't say very much ...'

'One doesn't always need to. But I gather he's said enough.... Is it all happy for you now, my child?'

'Very happy — extraordinarily happy.' She stroked his hair. 'I expect you've known what it feels like, haven't you?'

Mr. Celian remembered that if he hadn't he ought to have; and murmured, 'Approximately, I dare say.' He had at least drawn near enough to that state of 'extraordinary happiness' to be able to imagine it very well. He added, smoothing her knee, 'I'm more glad than I can tell you, Phœbs. I've always coveted Martin for you.... And you've both been very good. I'm glad to find people sometimes get their deserts! ... Is he back at the End House permanently now?'

'I didn't ask him — we really hardly spoke.... Of course, nothing can be said about this for a long time. I thought it might even be wiser not to tell Mother.'

'I dare say she won't need much telling,' said Mr. Celian, recalling a night, six months ago, when his wife had surprisingly cried because Phœbe had allowed herself to like a married man. 'Your mother often sees more than we give her credit for.... But you mustn't mind waiting a bit longer. You've got what you want, and that's the main thing.'

'Yes. I don't mind waiting.... Guv'nor, are you pleased for your children — Roger and me?'

'Most happy for them,' he said, and immediately thought of the niece for whom he was not happy at all.

'*That lost child's heart...*' Could she suppose that Alfred was the man to stop its weeping?

Phœbe kissed the top of his head. 'I must go and talk to Mother; I've neglected her. And I shall go to bed very soon to-night. Wonderful night — wonderful world!... Good-night, Guv-nor — give me a proper kiss.'

He turned round and pulled her into his arms, kissing her very tenderly and calling her his 'sweeting,' as he used to when she was a child. But behind his pleasure in her happiness he was conscious of a restless and melancholy oppression of spirit, which had come upon him since dinner, though he had been able to ignore it while he worked. And secretly, guiltily, he was almost relieved when she went away, and he was at liberty to return to his papers again.

Yet he sat idly before them for some time, his thoughts still with Phœbe and Martin. He was immensely relieved that their love-affair was satisfactorily settled at last, so far as essentials were concerned, and he had no fear that either of them would be harmfully irked by further delay. If Martin were half as certain of his feelings as Phœbe was of hers, there lay before them a better chance of happiness than the majority of marriages offered. Mr. Celian, soothed and contented for them, hoped his son would be equally fortunate. Nothing, he reflected, was certain for anyone, but at least some couples got a good start, and that both his children seemed likely to have. At least, too, they had had no example, in their own parents, of squabbling and dissensions; the atmosphere of their home, from that aspect, had always been propitious enough.

It was significant, he thought further, how both these

happy settlements had followed closely upon the departure of the element most threatening to the tranquillity of Mulberry Lodge. So short a time ago Lena had been, or seemed, the centre of disturbance there; yet, as soon as she appeared to be disposed of and her obscurely discordant presence withdrawn, the emotions of those left behind relapsed into their suitable channels. And she herself? What suitability for that deep and restless current could the channel of Alfred Somerdew provide? Nature surely wasn't contradictory and indecent enough for that experiment to end well. Such a union must entail disaster of some kind, to someone, sooner or later.... Mr. Celian drew a deep breath and hitched his chair closer to the table.

He heard Phœbe go up to bed as the clock struck ten. Soon afterwards the telephone bell rang, and shutting himself into the box in the hall he took up the receiver.

The Exchange answered him. 'Is that Soames Green 121? ... Hold the line, please — I'm getting a trunk call through.'

Mr. Celian waited obediently, expecting to hear the voice of Frank, who had doubtless remembered his important omission and that a message must reach their client by Monday morning. He hoped devoutly that Alfred had not been seized with the desire for a playful communication across the wires. His letter about his engagement had been trying enough.... The chance that Lena herself had chosen to ring up was too small for considering, though a forlorn and nervous hope stirred in her uncle's mind.

He heard at last — 'You're through' — and then, very faint and thin — 'Hullo ... is that Mr. Celian?'

'Yes. That you, Frank? — you *are* a scoundrel!'

'What? — What did you say, sir?'

'I say you're a scoundrel — you forgot the message about Pike.... Never mind — I've got the papers here. Just tell me which is the letter I want — I've been hunting all day.'

'I'm most frightfully sorry. You'll find the figures in Seagrave's letter of February the 16th.... But I say, sir...'

'Well — any news?'

'Yes. Yes, there is.... I found an awfully worrying situation up here to-day. My father's horribly upset...'

Mr. Celian's vague oppression of spirit suddenly took shape as a definite anxiety, and his fingers tightened on the receiver. 'Upset? — What's happened?'

'Well, the fact is... I suppose Lena's not at Mulberry Lodge?'

'*Here?* No! Isn't she with you?'

'No, sir. She's — she's chucked everything up and gone.... I hoped she might have gone home.'

Beneath his startled uneasiness Mr. Celian felt a stirring of relief. He repeated, 'She's not here. We haven't heard from her for some days. When did she leave Roden?'

'On Monday, my father says. He didn't tell Katie or Harold there was anything wrong — I think he hoped it was only a whim and would blow over.... But he heard from her yesterday and realised that it's final. So he told the others then, and then waited for me — and I insisted on telephoning to you at once. He oughtn't to have left you in the dark.'

At the back of his mind Mr. Celian was conscious of an almost hilarious satisfaction that what Alfred did or didn't do was now no further concern of his. And

quite unirritated, for once, at being left in the dark, he said mildly, 'No, I suppose not.... What address did Lena give?'

'None. But there was a London postmark.... Is there anything I can do, sir? I'm ashamed that you weren't told before.'

'Not your fault, Frank.' Mr. Celian was faintly entertained at the image of Frank for once bearding his father and taking matters into his own hands. But he liked him the better for it. 'No, there's nothing you can do. I must think.... Lena's probably gone to friends in London — she'll probably write very soon. I don't think we need be very anxious about her. But I'm extremely sorry for your father's distress. Tell him so, please — and I'll write when we have news. Lena's her own mistress, you know; I couldn't interfere, even if she were at home.... Good-night, Frank; thanks very much for ringing up. You'll be at the office on Tuesday morning?'

'Yes, sir — unless the old man wants me to stay. He's in rather a state.'

'Stay if he wants you, of course. I can manage. Good-night.'

He returned slowly to the library and leant against the shut door, staring at the litter of papers under his reading-lamp.

Gone.... What did that mean? Gone where? Alone — or not alone? ... And why no letter? Surely she might have known there was no disapproval to fear — or none from *him*. He was only thankful, thankful that she had turned her back on that old man....

But something must be done — some effort made to find her; and somebody must be told. Not Phœbe —

he wouldn't tell Phœbe to-night. 'Wonderful night — wonderful world ...' That wonderfulness should be preserved for her till the morning, without the cloud of his anxiety about her cousin. For though from one aspect he was greatly relieved by this sudden development, he was undeniably ill at ease. He wanted very much to know where Lena was and what she meant to do. Apart from anything else it was his sheer duty to know these things, even if he could not know what might be passing through her mind and soul.... What a lot — he thought irrelevantly — what a lot Phœbe had been given, with so little asking or striving! And for this vanished, strange, passionate little cousin there seemed to be no refuge or rest or peace....

He must tell Amy, he supposed. Or *must* he? Why not wait a little longer — just till Monday, and if no letter came then, he would take action. There might conceivably be a letter at the office now. If Lena wanted to make her explanation to him alone, she might have chosen to write him there.

Stuffing his papers into an attaché case, he crossed the hall to the drawing-room. 'I want a breath of air, Amy; I shall take these up the street. You go off to bed and don't wait for me.'

Mrs. Celian was putting her cards in a drawer and turned round with a contented yawn. 'Very well, darling; I was just going upstairs. I brought the Demon out three times to-night — wasn't that nice?'

'No cheating?'

'Only a *very* little — just one peep to see what was underneath. Didn't I hear the telephone just now?'

'Yes. It was Frank, from Roden. If he'd rung up sooner, it would have saved me a lot of work.' To salve

his conscience for this equivocation, Mr. Celian thought — 'She'll sleep the better for not knowing' — and kissed his wife's cheek.

He walked slowly up the deserted High Street and turned the key in his private door. 'Mr. Celian of Soames Green . . .' Mechanically the familiar, treasured phrase crossed his mind.

Passing his own room, he went and looked in the letter-box, with no real expectation of finding the envelope that a moment later lay in his hand. He stared at Lena's small, clear, vigorous handwriting with a sense of increased apprehension and reluctance to read her news. But at least the letter's arrival suggested that he need not be anxious about her in any material sense. He carried it to his room, and opened the window looking into the garden; a square of yellow light from his lamp fell on the skeleton fruit-trees climbing the wall. Sitting at his table, tilting the lamp-shade and adjusting his spectacles, he tore open the envelope.

There was no address at the head of the folded sheet inside; only the date of the previous day. With a sense of uncomfortable constriction in his chest, Mr. Celian read:

Dear Uncle Peter,—By this time you will probably have heard what has happened at Roden. I've decided not to marry Alfred. So I was obliged to go away, and I'm in London now, sharing rooms with an old Art School friend. I'm going to work. I've already been given a journalistic job of sorts, and I can get along quite well with the salary and my own money. If it's not too much trouble, would you please have my

things sent to Box Number 521, Jarrow's Library, Chelsea, and I'll collect them. I'd rather nobody wrote, and I don't want anyone to come and hunt me out. Don't let Aunt Amy worry about me, please. I shall be safe and very busy. You know I wanted to get away from Soames Green, and this seems to me the best way.

I don't wish to seem ungrateful for the kind care you and Aunt Amy have given me, but I would rather be let alone to go my own way. I can't come back to Mulberry Lodge; and I know I shan't be missed.

There's nothing else to say, I think.

LENA

With an abrupt movement Mr. Celian switched off his lamp and sat in the dark, staring at the patch of lesser darkness beyond the window.

The letter hurt him deeply; yet, as she herself wrote in that stark, final phrase, there was 'nothing else to say.' She had dutifully told him what had occurred — when had Lena, in one sense, been other than dutiful to him? — supplied an address of sorts and given an outline of her future way of life. From the comparative stranger she chose to make of herself, nothing more was essential.... He would obey her terse injunctions; no one should worry her or try to hunt her out; she should be let alone to go her own inscrutable way.... But he felt a profound sadness creep upon him as he sat there with his hands folded on her inexpressive, unemotional letter of farewell.

Yet in a little while other considerations tempered his distress. She had broken her contract with that intolerable man. So, after all, her delicacy and fastidiousness were not delusions of his own; they existed in

fact, and in the last resort had become too urgent for any lower impulse. She couldn't go on — poverty and hard work must gradually have seemed to her preferable to the slow disease of Alfred — and she wouldn't go back. She chose to cut herself off from both alternatives and live a new life of her own. In his unhappiness at that sudden cleavage, on the heels of their never-concluded interview, Mr. Celian was greatly consoled by the vision of her at work — 'living strenuously' at last, instead of in the unhealthy stagnation of her purposeless egotism. Purposeless, at least, in that all her emotional aims at Soames Green had failed.

That brought back the ache of his own failure towards her, his sense of partial responsibility for the suffering which in the end had impelled her towards Alfred. Poor half-wise, half-foolish, driven thing — so inwardly unbalanced, so out of proportion to life, in spite of her magnificent surface assurance and control. He felt, comprehending some of her obscurity now, that he could not grudge her this final manœuvre, disproportionate in its method as that was too. No one would have opposed her desire for work in London if she had broached it in an orthodox way. This secrecy, this unemotional yet dramatic exit, were both merely a part of her morbid habit of aggravating her own pains.

Yet there was much hope for Lena if she had found an object and purpose in work. If he might not have the privilege of trying to comfort and help her, he had the comfort himself of thinking of her, not in Alfred's unlovely keeping, but working, writing, using the better parts of her complex nature instead of the worst. She had brains; she might go far.

But still, he thought sadly, the pity of it — the pity

and waste of their spoilt relation to each other....

A chilly wind began to sigh through his garden, shaking the ivy leaves that fringed the window-frame. The lights of Soames Green were going out one by one, leaving the town and its gardens and trees to the stars and the wind.

Mr. Celian remembered it on a day in September when the air had seemed to him like gold dust and he had been so worried about Phœbe and Martin and Roger and Lena.... Six months ago — months of suppressed anxiety about his children and veiled hostility towards his niece — and in the end an obscure pain born in his heart which would never quite be soothed till the heart itself ceased to beat. For it seemed to him that of all aches the spirit can know, the worst must be for the spoiling of a potentially lovely thing, the knowledge that a little wisdom and gentleness might have averted the spoiling and preserved the loveliness.

'*Gropes for the perished good, and weeps again.*'

Tears, hurting his eyelids like grains of sand, welled up from his sore heart as those words drifted into his mind.... Roger and Phœbe and Martin had all been made happy and tranquil again; only this one alien and difficult soul, chief disturber of their peace, was left still empty and disconsolate.

Perhaps, he thought, in melancholy self-comfort, the good and happy fed always on the tears of the not good and not happy... perhaps, instead of punishment hereafter, there was great gentleness waiting for the unhappy and bad — all the things sought for so hungrily, by foolish and evil means, granted at last, without evil, because they had been desired with such strength of

emotion, and because the seeker had been hurt so much....

Nice to think that — comforting to think that.... And there was still time for Lena to find her 'perished good' again. No better medium than work.... If she found it, perhaps she would come back to him one day — before he died, before he died — and they would be friends. She might be happy then, not hurt, not repulsed any more.... But until that time came, he, the hurter, must creep along in his quiet groove without her, trying to forgive himself....

The bell of Soames Green church struck twelve; and a little sigh, a little shiver at the death of another day, went through the garden and the ivy leaves.

THE END

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SOAMES GREEN

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